

BEST STORIES
OF

Modern Bengal



BEST STORIES OF MODERN BENGAL



VOLUME ONE

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Translated by Nilima Devi



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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

BENGALI LITERATURE IS PERHAPS THE MOST MATURE AND vital of all the contemporary literatures of India. It has been felt for a long time that the literature of Bengal should be presented before a much wider public than that of Bengal alone. Of course, a portion of the works of Rabindranath Tagore has been translated not only into the different languages of India, but also of the world. To a certain extent, the works of Bankim Chandra Chatterji and Sarat Chandra Chatterji have also been translated into some of the Indian languages, as well as English. But those who are not familiar with the Bengali language are practically ignorant of the modern trends in its literature, and the names of most of the modern Bengali writers convey little or nothing to them.

In publishing this collection of short stories in English, it has been the aim of THE SIGNET PRESS to bridge this gap and give the non-Bengali public some idea of the developments in modern Bengali literature. With the same object in view a Hindi translation of this anthology is in preparation; and translation into other languages is under contemplation.

The material we gathered in attempting to collect one story each by all those writers, who in our opinion, can be considered truly modern, was found to be too un-

wieldy for publication in one volume. We therefore decided to publish this collection in two parts, of which this is the first volume containing twelve stories. In preparing these two volumes we have not followed the usual chronological order, nor have we placed the authors by order of merit. Stories by some of the mature and well-established writers have been included in the second volume with the stories by the most promising writers of the younger generation, in order to make it as well balanced and varied as possible. The second volume is now in the press and will be released shortly.

It is natural that personal preferences should have played some part in our selection, but advice was also sought from a wide circle of critics as well as the authors themselves who, in the majority of cases, agreed with us. We are grateful to all of them for giving us the benefit of their valuable opinion.

We have, however, tried to keep two main points in view. The first: that the story should be the most suitable for translation, both from the writer and the translator's point of view, i.e. it should, when translated, be able to convey the writer's style in the most representative manner, and at the same time be equally readable in translation as in the original. The second: that the stories should cover as many aspects of the life of Bengal as it was lived yesterday, is being lived today, and will perhaps be lived tomorrow. That the themes should provide the greatest variety and feature every class and strata

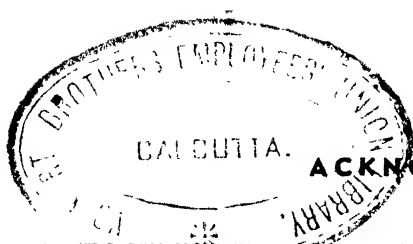
of Bengali society: the town dweller and the villager; the petty clerk and the old zamindar; the peasant and the politician; the industrialist as well as the poor labourer.

We acknowledge our debt of gratitude to a number of people for their help, advice and co-operation. First, to the authors and publishers for granting us permission to include their stories in our anthology; to Dr. Amiya Chakravarty and Mr. Debiprosad Chatterjee for writing the notes on the authors; and to Mr. N. K. Gossain and Mr. L. C. Roy for their keen interest in the printing of this book. We have also to thank Miss Emily Durham for undertaking the arduous secretarial work.



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ACHINTYA KUMAR SENGUPTA



H A R E N D R A

HEARING THAT I HAD A COLD, MISS SIRKAR HAD COME TO see me. We were getting along fine. In our discussion of remedies for a cold we had progressed from aconite to raw brandy. Suddenly I saw two huge ferocious eyes on the other side of the window opposite us. I asked, "Who is that?"

I received no reply. Immediately the two eyes closed, but I felt the burning blast of a sigh. The man was moving away carefully, I got up suddenly, came and stood outside, then mustering up all the heaviness in my cold-ridden voice I roared out, "Who's that?"

"I."

"Who's this I?"

"I am Harendra."

None of you know Harendra, but he is the punkah-puller in my office.

I have often wondered why this happens? At the very moment when a propitious breeze touches its sail, why does a steamer crash into a boat and make it capsize? But it does happen, will happen, and has happened before many times. Just because Mr. Sirkar cannot condescend to visit his inferior officers for fear of losing prestige—God has sent Harendra.

I could have dismissed him immediately without giving a single word of explanation, because this was the only person whom I could appoint or sack from his job. But if I dismissed him now my household would be finished for today as well as tomorrow.

By household I mean the lighting of the kitchen fire, marketing, washing-up, sweeping of rooms—ask your wife and you will know.

For me Harendra was one-half a fan and the other half a wheel.

Miss Sirkar had gone long ago, it was ten o'clock at night and I was drinking my twenty-first cup of tea, when I sent for Harendra. I should at least have scolded him harshly, why did he come and not only peep at my window, but stared unwinkingly with a burning look of expectation. But I thought, he came only seven days ago, before I scolded him I ought to get to know him. I no longer had the habit of passing judgment before having gone through the evidence for and against someone. So I called Harendra.

He was over six feet tall, but his body was twisted up like a rope. His two cheeks were sunken; his two eyes bulged out of two deep hollows; his jaw-bones pushed forward in an aggressive distortion. His loose and wobbly neck made one feel a sort of pity mixed with compassion for him. Every one of his ribs showed on his chest, seeing which I could not speak harshly to him. One could fit every feature of his face and his looks with his poverty and sorrow, excepting his two eyes. In them there was neither any humility nor timidity. Those eyes were as fierce as they were bewildered. Just because I was a man, I did not feel frightened. I asked, "Have you any illness?"

In a sad voice Harendra replied, "Yes, huzur."

"What?"

"I have a constant headache for the last eleven years. It increases when night falls and I can't sleep through the whole night. For eleven years now!"

"How old are you?"

"Thirty-eight."

"You've been suffering for so long. Why can't you take some medicine?"

"Medicine? Where will I get medicine?" Showing his dirty, wide-apart teeth Harendra laughed.

I said, "How do you work with this headache?"

"Otherwise how will I fill my stomach huzur? First, I must have a spine before I can stand up on my feet."

"How much do you get for pulling the punkah?"

"Six rupees, and two from you. I can manage on that."

"You can? Haven't you any children at home?"

Harendra laughed again, as briefly as before and said, "They say, when there is no blossom how can there be any fruit?"

"Why, is your wife dead?"

"I didn't have a wife, huzur."

I stared at Harendra's face for some time. "What's the reason for this inhuman indifference or distaste for women?" Harendra could not understand me. So I asked him straight, "Why haven't you married?"

"Where will I get one?" Harendra's deep sigh

reached my ears after he had finished speaking.

"What do you mean by where will you get one? Why, aren't there any girls of your caste in your village?"

Harendra laughed, it was a laugh which was akin to despair. He said, "Because I'm getting old."

"Does a bachelor ever get old? Why, aren't there any grown-up girls in your village? Or were they all married off before the Sarda Act was passed?"

"Of course, there are. There's Beguni, the daughter of Sannyasi Bawali." Harendra's eyes suddenly lit up.

"How old is she?"

"Can't be less than twenty-two."

"Then she'll match you well. Why not marry her?"

"Her father wants six scores of rupees."

"Money, what for?"

"Dowry, huzur."

"In your part of the country do women take the dowry? Just the other way round, I see." But really, when I reckoned it up, I felt that this was the just rule. I continued, "Because he can't get a dowry, that low-down shoemaker-caste of a father is not marrying the girl? He is starving her life? He should be handed over to the police."

My futile spite made Harendra laugh. He said, "It's no use blaming Sannyasi Khuro (uncle) for this; huzur. That is our custom and it can't be changed in any way. Girls represent good luck, that's why they are so expensive."

Quite annoyed, I asked, "Is Sannyasi your uncle?"

"He's no relation, it's just that we belong to the same village. We have adjoining lands; his house is quite close to ours also, there's only a small pond in between. When I was twenty-two and Beguni six, my father proposed our marriage. But Sannyasi Khuro's demand reached thirty-six rupees at one go. Debts to the moneylender; tax owing to the landowner; two cropless years one after the other; from where was father to get the money? That year went, the next year our land was auctioned for non-payment of taxes, the buyer paid the decree-money and took possession. Wants piled upon wants, where was any money? We couldn't buy a bullock to plough our land, leave alone marriage! On the other hand, as time passed, the scale of Sannyasi Khuro's demand rose higher, key by key. Now it has reached up to six score rupees. In our parts, the price of a girl rises with her age."

"It's a country not of men but ghosts! Who'll marry an old woman and moreover pay money for her?"

"Old men like me. Old men crop up along with old women."

"Then do one thing. You're getting eight rupees, start saving something from now. By the time Begunbala (daughter of a brinjal) reaches the age of thirty-six, you'll be able to catch her up!"

"Eight rupees! Most of our land is gone, it's come down to three bighas now. The crops we get out of the

land aren't sufficient even for feeding the household. Shall we eat first or pay taxes? I've shoved the plough on to my old father's shoulders and am pulling a punkah here, in the hope of paying off even a portion of the taxes, cess and demands of the landowner's officers. It's ridiculous to think of marriage or a home for me! The other day I told Beguni straightaway—" Harendra swallowed and left the rest unsaid.

"What were you saying?" I made him pick up the same thread, "You asked her to marry you?"

Covered with perspiration, pausing for breath, Harendra said, "I told her, what's the good of waiting like this and both of us getting old day by day. You won't get the money, that Sannyasi Khuro will take it. Why do you want to waste your husband's money for nothing? Come, let's both go away."

In a flash, a wide expanse of blue sky and sloping fields seemed to open up before my eyes. I said, "What did Beguni say?"

"Oh, she made fun of me. Cocking her eyes, twisting her waist and gesturing with her hands, she quoted a doggerel: What hopes rise in one's heart—to wear bells on the toe, below anklets on the feet!"

I burst out laughing and Harendra too laughed with me. But I never knew that laughter could be so poignant or that a cry of agony could be thus expressed!

"All right, get along, that's enough. You don't know what you've escaped by not marrying. Marriage entails

a thousand and one troubles. A child today, a child tomorrow, this, that and the other—till it brings you to the end of your tether. You're much better off without marriage, you neither have to carry burdens, nor do you owe anything to anyone. Here I am, I haven't married, so what? Does it give me a headache, or does it make me peep through someone else's window like a thief?"

My own phrase rang in my ears again and again that night: "Here I am, I haven't married, so what?" Was it anything of a want, or emptiness, or weariness, so what? I knew that the desire for milk cannot be slaked with whey; but when milk turned sour how long would it take to become whey! When there was no end to one's thirst, what on earth was the use of decking out an empty decanter?

One day I asked Harendra, "Where is your home?"

"Kotalgunj. It's about two miles from Hiranpur station where one gets off."

"I'll go to see your village." But Harendra could hardly believe it. "There's a holiday soon for the Rath festival, I'll go then. You'll have to take me and show me the way." When on the day of the holiday, I asked Harendra to call a thikka-gharry to take us to the station, he became really bewildered and asked, "Are you really going, huzur?"

"Yes, don't you see, I had my meal so early today."

"What is there to see at our place?" he asked falteringly.

"Your Beguni is there. Let me see if I can induce Sannyasi and fix your marriage."

Harendra's face beamed with joy and bashfulness. "Well, do you feel the headache is slightly less?" I asked. Gazing with affection in his eyes, he said, "It'll cause you a lot of hardship, huzur."

"But I can't bear to see you suffer so much."

"What's the suffering about, because I can't marry Beguni?"

Harendra's pride was touched.

"No, because you aren't able to marry at all. Come on, call a gharry. We'll be able to return by the afternoon train."

It was about two o'clock when I arrived at Sannyasi Bawali's place. Sannyasi was working in his fields, Harendra went and called him. Harendra must have advertised well who I was, but it did not seem as if Sannyasi was greatly overwhelmed. I felt I had made a terrible mistake in not coming dressed up in a coat and trousers!

At any rate, Sannyasi had undoubtedly realised that I was something higher than a landowner's rent-collector or agent. There was a white-ant-ridden wooden seat in the open paved space before his house, he spread a dirty oily mat on it, for me to sit. I asked, "You have a daughter?" Sannyasi nodded, but he did not seem to understand what it was all about. "She's of marriageable age?"

"She's old enough to be a mother-in-law!" he answered with a sigh.

"Could you let me see her once?" This was something still more difficult for Sannyasi to understand. He stared foolishly at Harendra's face. "This isn't something new, I want to arrange your daughter's marriage with Harendra. Well? Have you any objection?"

"Not at all," said Sannyasi quite pleased, "I'll let her go if I get money. Besides, I don't see any other worth while candidate in our community except Harendra."

"Very good. Since I am his master I'll act as the bridegroom's guardian for him. What do you say, isn't that right?"

"Quite right." Sannyasi nodded his head in assent.

"Then the girl should be shown once to the bridegroom's guardian. Unless he sees her how can he judge what her price should be."

"The price, huzur, is one thousand rupees, not a pie less. But Harendra is a poor man, in consideration for that I've compromised on only six score rupees."

I would see about that later. I asked, "Do I have to go inside your house to see your daughter?"

"No, why, she'll come here when she's called," and Sannyasi cried out immediately, "Beguni!" Then with a smiling face he went on, "Doing the marketing, grazing the cows, bringing food for me to the field, ploughing while I rest and have a smoke, all that she does for

me. She has no mother, no brothers or sisters, she's all that I have." He called out again, "Beguni!"

Though it was hardly worthy of the name of door, a girl of about twenty or twenty-two came and stood in front of it. "What were you doing for so long?" asked Sannyasi.

Beguni replied laughingly, "I was husking rice."

So long when I had looked at women I had looked at them in terms of their dress, whether it was good or bad. But now for the first time I looked at a girl without reference to her clothes; because the girl did not have even an ordinary chemise on her body; she wore a thick unbleached red-bordered sari (I was wondering if in the meantime she had not dressed up!) which was equally brief both in its length and its breadth. She made it appear still more brief by gathering one end of the sari in her hands to cover a part of her face and hide her laughter. Still, I felt as if after being out in the hot mid-day sun I had found the shade of a tree. I wondered, what was beauty? Where was it to be found? Her complexion was pure black, her features frank and plain, and then that get-up! But, I felt I had never come across anyone with such bubbling vitality, such brimming health. She was like a vigorous creeper which had sprung out of the earth and which, after being bathed with sunlight, moonlight and dew had become hardy, fresh and green. Still, she was a creeper and not the string of a guitar or a petticoat elastic. I felt I had so long looked upon scraped

teeth, Kruschen Salts and Tangee as beauty, because I had not seen Beguni. I asked, "Do you like Harendra?"

Beguni was laughing and laughing, in gush after gush of laughter. I enquired, "Do you want money?" Beguni's laughter increased in layer upon layer, fold upon fold. And in the waters of that laughter, had now risen waves of bashfulness. She could no longer stand there. I asked Sannyasi, "Tell me precisely how much you'll accept?"

"I've already told you that it won't be a pie less than six score rupees."

"What nonsense you talk! What good will money do to you?"

"What good either will letting her go do to me? Is it likely that I'll send away such a daughter without getting a pice? Does anyone ever do such a thing?" Sannyasi rolled his eyes in anger.

"Perhaps not. But where's the groom for your daughter excepting Harendra?"

"But where's my daughter without the money?"

I did not know in which way I should progress. I told him, "But do you propose to keep her an old maid by not giving her in marriage? She too has her hopes and desires!"

"Why doesn't the person who seems to have greater hopes and desires than my daughter fling down six score rupees? Then, the matter would end."

"But where is Harendra to get it from? He's drown-

ed in debts and taxes.”

“ And I’m swimming in plenty, am I? That money I’d throw on the moneylender’s face and get back my mortgaged land.”

“ But how long can one keep money?”

“ He says for how long! When I never had it even for a day,” Sannyasi made a face.

“ But you ought to think over this, that there is not another groom like Harendra. Today he is pulling a punkah, tomorrow he’ll be an orderly, and in a few days he’ll become a court peon. Think of it, a court peon will be your son-in-law.”

“ Does that mean that I’ll give my daughter without getting a dowry?” cried Sannyasi angrily. “ Do you think I haven’t a position in society? What will people say of me? They’ll never invite me to any feast. Shame, shame, shall I do what no one on earth does—give away my daughter without any payment? If not Harendra, there’s Mahendra, on the other side of the village there’s Raicharan, there’s Dwarik— ”

“ All, all of them are younger in age than her, huzur.” It felt as if Harendra suddenly made this hollow sound from inside the depths of some cave.

“ What does it matter! If a fifty or sixty-year-old man can marry a young girl of fourteen, why shouldn’t the opposite thing do just as well? What can I do, if a groom of suitable age can’t be had? It’s not that in our parts of the country it hasn’t happened before, that an older girl

has married a younger boy. Whoever has the money will get the marriage bangle."

"But why should young boys agree to marry your daughter?"

"If they don't agree, she won't be married, but because of that I can't loose caste and be expelled from society by marrying my daughter without taking payment."

"I realise everything Sannyasi—but still I can't help feeling sorry that even though you are a father, you don't seem to take into consideration the suffering your attitude is bringing upon your daughter."

Sannyasi retorted, "Why don't you either, in consideration of your chaprassi's suffering, put down those few rupees from your own pocket!"

I had been afraid that the matter would come to this. When my pocket was touched, I felt, what childishness was this that I was up to? Who was this Harendra that I should have a headache over his headache! A girl's price, not just for a day only, but for her whole life, was but a hundred and twenty rupees! The manhood which lay asleep in Harendra would one day rise and curse me, unashamed, saying that instead of making him a victor I had made him a beggar! I got up and said, "Let's go home Harendra. It's nearly time for our train."

We crossed the field in silence. Suddenly Harendra made a shy apology, "No father ever agrees, huzur, each place has its own custom, it can't be changed."

I did not give any reply.

"One never knows," Harendra remarked again, "Perhaps that Mahendra or Dwarik will marry her in the end. But it's also certain, where have they the money? But one can't tell, perhaps they'll go and borrow it!"

"Let them," I broke out angrily. "What a paragon of beauty! And for her, he wants not twenty or ten, but a hundred and twenty rupees! One can get the Queen of Greenland for that money!"

Harendra was completely confounded, he did not quite understand what sort of a creature the Queen of Greenland could be.

After this for a long time I had not looked at Harendra viewing him as an individual human being. But one night I heard a sound of howling coming from the servants' quarters, just like that of a dog. I thought that perhaps the cook before going out had shut up in a room the dog which came begging for leavings every night. But if I had the consciousness of someone or something being shut up, sleep would not come to my eyes throughout the night.

I crossed the courtyard and pushed the door. I saw Harendra with a rope bound hard across his forehead, clinging to the wall with both hands and beating his head on it and letting out howls of pain like that of a dumb animal. Instantly my body froze into stone. I asked, "What's the matter?"

Harendra did not raise his head to look at me. He

just said, "There's a terrible pain in my head, I can't sleep."

I felt that he longed for a complete weariness to sink into a bottomless peace, a dreamless sleep—a sleep which gave a taste of death. I said, "Come to my room." Harendra came. I told him, "I'm giving you this money, go away somewhere for a few days." Harendra thought I was dismissing him. I asked, "Do you drink? Have you ever had a drink?" Harendra bit his tongue and his face turned pale. I remarked, "What's the matter, why are you trying to vomit without having tasted it? If you had it you'd calm down and become absorbed in deep sleep."

"How awful!" It seemed that instead of a terrible pain in his head Harendra felt it in his heart; he continued, "Even if I die, I won't be able to put such a thing into my mouth. Otherwise, I could easily have taken a job in a factory where I'd get a good salary, and plenty of other gains. But I've heard everyone there takes that thing. No one can keep his character there."

"No wonder they call you people peasants! Go, go and bang your head on the wall!" I burst out laughing and that laugh seemed to reassure Harendra a great deal. He said, "Whatever happens, huzur, I can't afford to lose my character."

I said, "Then do one thing, open a subscription list. Try to raise a hundred and twenty rupees by going round begging and asking as long as it takes to get it. Here,

take these five rupees, I was going to give you this money today. Let mine be the first subscription—take it and put it away in your box.”

Harendra put out his hand and took it, he touched the five rupee note with his forehead and immediately burst out into tears.

By and by the Puja vacation came round; the punkah season was over so Harendra came to take leave and depart. I asked, “How much did you get in all this time?”

“Twelve rupees and three half annas.”

“See if you can obtain your desire in twelve years!”

After this I had not kept any track of Harendra, but as soon as next March came he arrived as a candidate for the punkah-puller's job. He had become half of what he was, somehow one could not bear to look at him with one's eyes open and at the same time one felt frightened to shut one's eyes before him either. Harendra put down his umbrella beside him, fell on the ground and touched my feet. I asked, “How are you?”

“Not well, huzur.”

“How much have you got on your subscription list?”

“It had become twenty-one rupees—you wrote such a forceful appeal for me.”

“Had become? What do you mean? Where's the money?”

“Oh, money!” Harendra pressed both hands on the ground and took a deep breath, then continued, “One

bullock died of smallpox, I saw that there was no way to run the plough so I bought father a bullock with the money."

For an instant I remained silent, then said, "Then why pull a punkah? Father and son both go and push the plough. This time I shan't keep you—I'll appoint someone else—you aren't suited here."

But that very same day something happened which forced me to appoint Harendra. A Swamiji (Hindu monk) from the next district had come here to raise subscriptions for establishing some sort of a home for fallen women or unmarried mothers. I talked with the Swamiji for quite a long time over many things. The main work of their order and the main problem they dealt with, was to once again find a place in society for these unfortunate women; to create for them the decent environment of domestic life; to get back a place in their husband's home for those who were already married; and the safe protection of married life for those who were still unmarried. I asked, "Could you find me a bride?"

"For whom?"

"For my punkah-puller." And then I told him the tale of Harendra's life, which bereft of blood and tears had changed into a lump of stone—even up to his buying of a plough-bull with the subscription-money collected for his marriage.

"This Hindu society!" Swamiji blossomed forth into a lecture

I said, "Have you any girls of low caste?"

"It's they who form the majority!"

"Then find one please. My Harendra is a very good person. Leaving other things aside, I can give a first-class certificate about his character."

Swamiji smiled and said, "Will he be able to feed her?"

"That's a problem for your town-bred boys. People who are as poor as Harendra, aren't afraid of worrying about feeding their wives. They have equal courage to face both want and plenty. Get a girl for him, she'll live happy as a queen."

"Then you had better come with me and approve a girl."

I laughed, "What's there to approve in this?"

"Tomorrow is Sunday, then come and see our ashrama."

The next day I went with Swamiji. The ashrama consisted of a broken-down two-storied house, and its office consisted of an almirah and a couple of tables and chairs in a downstairs room. The organisation had just been started, but already there were quite a number of inmates. I heard plenty of noise, shouting and the sound of quarrelling from upstairs. Swamiji took me to an empty room upstairs and one after the other he brought three girls before me and said, "None of these girls are married."

I did not have to question any further about their

caste or name, because I recognised Beguni. She had no reason to remember me, but I wondered where her silvery laughter and brimming vitality had disappeared. She looked as if someone had dipped and half-boiled her in a cauldron of ink.

I asked about her history. Swamiji brought out his record-books and told me her story. The usual vulgar tale which meets the eye when one opens any newspaper.

"Has anyone been convicted?"

"Several have been convicted but some of them were let off also."

"The girl couldn't find shelter anywhere?"

"No, she had a father, but he refused to take her back."

"Good, I select this girl. But is she willing to marry?"

"Immediately," Swamiji laughed. "Which girl is unwilling to marry?" Then he asked Beguni, who was standing nearby, in gentle tones, "Well, mother, are you willing to marry? Whether the husband is poor or ugly, will you be able to be happy living with him, serving him, sharing his joys and sorrows?"

With eyes laden with tears Beguni replied in a sweet sad voice, "I will."

I came back that night, called Harendra and asked him smiling, "Well, will you marry Beguni?"

Harendra looked at me vacantly like a cipher and asked, "Whom?"

"Beguni."

"Beguni?" Harendra gave a moan of pain and cried out, "Where is she? Has she been found?"

I pretended as if I did not know anything and asked, "Why, where is she to go?"

"Huzur, she was abducted. What a lot of running to the thana and police, then criminal investigations and police case! After that when her father refused to take her back, I heard she had given up the world and gone away no one knew where."

"It's well that the father didn't take her back. That's why today you can, if you choose, marry her without paying any dowry at all."

"Where is she?" Harendra's two eyes seemed to pop out.

"Wherever she may be, she's safe. But give an answer to my question, are you prepared to marry her?"

"Right away."

"Even in the state she is now?"

"Who got her into this condition, huzur?"

"Who?"

"Her father, the man who swore that he wouldn't let his daughter go for a pie less than six score rupees. Even in spite of being born a man, I couldn't get together this money in all these years."

"You're going to marry, but what'll you feed her on?"

"Spinach and rice, with salt, without salt, whatever God gives me."

In a moment I felt that Harendra was a very rich man indeed. I told him, "Go and sleep in peace now!"

"Sleep! Does sleep ever come to me?" With this Harendra was going away, then he turned and asked, "But huzur, is she all right?"

I pulled a book towards myself and pretending to be absent-minded and unconcerned, I replied, "She is."

Harendra stared at me for a long time, then went away slowly. I felt that he was wondering whether he should believe me or not.

Next morning when I enquired about him, I found Harendra was not there. My cook told me that Harendra was supposed to be getting married shortly so he had gone home to make arrangements. The time was short, also he had no money for train fare, so he got up while it was still dark and went home walking. But strangely enough, he had not taken his umbrella with him, perhaps as a sign that he was going to return very soon. There was, however, no sign of him again, after he went that day.

A month later, one evening, a telegram came from my father to say that the date of my marriage had been fixed on the forthcoming twenty-first of April, and I should immediately make an application for leave. I was turning over that telegram again and again, when suddenly Harendra made his appearance.

He looked a very symbol of terror. Before I could ask him anything he fell on my feet and covering his face with both hands he began weeping bitterly. "Why,

what's happened now?" I asked.

"I couldn't make anyone agree to it, huzur."

"Agree about what?"

"My marriage. My father, brother, relations, neighbours, fellow caste-men, every one of them is dead against it. Even the landowner's officers got terribly angry, they said they would raze our home to the ground and expel us from our land. Sannyasi Khuro too is going around threatening that if Beguni dares to enter the village, he would cut her to pieces and feed jackals on her flesh. I couldn't make them agree to it for anything, I just couldn't!" With this he overflowed with a fresh flood of tears. I listened to him in silence.

Everyone pressed me that considering his condition I should give him back his post as a punkah-puller. But whatever anyone might say, I absolutely refused to do so and told him to leave my house immediately. There was no other reason for this but that I could not bear to have a hungry, unfed, helpless creature prowling round me at a time when I was going to marry and bring home a wife.



ANNADA SANKAR RAY



UPAJACHIKA
OR
The Importunate Lady

FATHER HAD WRITTEN THAT HE WAS COMING BY THE EVENING train. Living all by myself I had to work pretty hard to convert my bungalow into a home suitable for an orthodox Hindu. At last when I got to the station I found that he had not come. I thought perhaps he had missed his train and would arrive by the early morning passenger. I put away the meal that I had ordered for him from a Hindu restaurant, though I myself had no sahib-like aversion to food of this kind.

To meet the early morning train one had to get up while it was still dark. Such over-abundance of filial affection did not agree with a sleepy head like mine. I sent my orderly instead. I made him repeat my father's name at least fifty times. I took him by the ears and painted my father's portrait in words.

"Not Rabinash Babu, but Abinash Babu, remember?"

"Yes, huzur."

I woke up rather late. Who knew what father was thinking of me. I jumped out of bed, but where was father?

The orderly salaamed me and with a wide grin he said, "Huzur has come."

I did not see father anywhere, so I asked, "Where is he?"

"There, smoking a biri (a cheap indigenous cigarette not smoked by better classes) under that tree."

What! My pious, vegetarian father smoking a biri in his old age! I saw a young fellow smoking a biri

stealthily, face turned towards the tree.

“Wretch! What name did you call out? Is he my father’s age?”

“Huzur, I called out Robi Babu, Robi Babu so many times. What could I do if no one gave any answer? Then he came and asked, ‘My good man! Do you know Bose Sahib’s bungalow?’ So I thought this was huzur’s—”

“Shut up, swine.”

The idiot stepped back two steps and folded his hands.

Hearing a sahib-like voice the chap under the tree threw away his biri with a start, as if caught in an act of theft by the sahib himself. Slowly he came forward and said, “Good-morning, sir. I wonder if you recognise me?”

There was not an ounce of flesh on his neck or cheeks; his elaborately dressed hair curved up into an orb at the parting. His figure was weak-waisted, thin and reedy like a young bamboo-shoot. While I tried to think who he was, he tried to show his dirty teeth in a grin, but he was not able to muster up enough courage.

“Oh, it’s Brindaban!” I cried exultantly, “Brindaban! Aren’t you?”

“I see you still remember me.”

“Brindaban! Binday! Where did you come from? Come in, come in.”

Brindaban did not know whether to discard the formal ‘you’ and address me as ‘thou,’ so he asked in

a roundabout way, "Is this the bungalow where one lives?"

"Yes, but can one call it a bungalow? You can see, there is neither light nor fan. Have a wash and get ready. First have something to eat, then we can talk of other things."

Brindaban, Binday, my childhood friend, had left school while we were in the third class and gone away. Later, I heard that he had become a railway contractor and was earning well. I was studying in college, and never had a pice to spend; the scholarship I got was not sufficient even for eating well; and Brindaban was scattering money with both hands. What a lot of money he gave away in bribes alone to the big, medium, small and petty sahibs!

So the wheel had come full circle. This was that same Brindaban and I the same Lalit. After having breakfasted on the sweets I had put away the night before, Brindaban seemed to go back to our childhood. Unconsciously he had gradually changed from the formal form of address to the most intimate. "You're doing grandly, Laltay! Yours, brother, is a worth while life. Getting a salary of two hundred and fifty rupees!"

"It's the natives who get two-fifty. My salary is three-fifty." •

"Three-fifty! This, right at the beginning, and you'll go on rising higher and higher, who knows how high you'll go! Then you'll get a pension. And you must be

getting some extras too." Saying this he winked and put his tongue in his teeth.

I kept silent.

He chattered away and growing more courageous he burst out saying, "You haven't married, I can see that, but tell me why? Couldn't bring someone from England?"

I had not expected him to ask a more well-mannered question. What better manners can one expect from a railway contractor? I smiled thinly and said, "Do you believe that an English memsahib would have given you as cordial a reception?"

Brindaban was taken aback; he said, "Look here, brother, if you have the slightest affection for your friends and relations never marry a memsahib." Noticing that I was smoking, "Cigar? What brand? Corona? Shall I taste one?"

"Certainly, certainly."

Brindaban began coughing and in the midst of it he said, "Of course, we haven't been to England. Still we too . . . we too . . . Eurasian memsahibs, if not real English . . . Tell me, have you made 'lob' in that country?"

I said jokingly, "You told me not to marry. Unless I marry how can I make love? Shouldn't love come after marriage?"

"Oh, no." Brindaban pulled at his cigar, became exhausted with coughing and continued, "I wasn't

talking about that kind of 'lob.' That love is divine. From whom will you get that kind of love except from a chaste Hindu wife? Find a good girl and marry her. Why are you delaying? If you ask me I'll look for a suitable bride."

"No." Then observing his earnestness I made a joke keeping my face very grave and said, "That sort of thing won't suit me. No sooner one has a wife, than the need for a midwife arises; and the moment the child arrives all her youth and beauty disappear."

Brindaban removed the cigar from his mouth which gaped in surprise. He asked, "Then?"

"Then?" I hesitated a little, then said, "A mistress will have to be kept. What harm if I keep one now?"

He thought of something, burst out laughing and said, "Go on!"

"But it's true."

"Go on!"

"You don't believe it? What's new in this?"

"Rama! Rama! Shame on you! Aren't you Uncle Abinash's son? Haven't you a degree in Commerce?" He got quite agitated over it.

Then he said with great pride, "We too have made 'lob,' even if it isn't with a real English memsahib! You don't believe it, do you? How can you? We haven't been to England, nor have we passed any examinations. But can anyone say when it was a question of ensuring the peace and honour of the souls of my father and grand-

father—of maintaining the caste-honour of a conservative Hindu Kayastha—of relieving a father bowed down with the burden of a marriageable daughter—that I have ever backed out of marriage? Why once, I'll marry ten times—I'm a man!" With this he stroked the scanty growth of hair on his lips and tried to twirl it too!

Now what was I to talk about with this most masculine of men? I said, "Oh! I forgot to ask if you are married or not!"

"Of course, you'll forget because we aren't officers, just mere clerks!"

"But why? Weren't you doing contractor's business in Asansol?"

"That contractor's business finished me. You won't believe me, Lalit, but once I got into 'lob' with one of them, a whole crowd hung round me. What a lot of debts piled up with having to go on giving all of them presents. Then that nasty disease—"

I started with terror. Here I was sitting at the same table and eating with this man!

"I became a skeleton after suffering with that nasty disease for one whole year. See, all my bones are sticking out. Nothing was effective against it. In the end—"

I breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Then you've got cured?"

"How can it not get cured?" Brindaban said with a grin widening up to his cheeks, though of course, his cheeks could hardly be called such. "The Hindu re-

ligion would be false if it didn't get cured. Have you heard of the god Siva in his image of Bhujangeshwar (Lord of the Snakes)?”

“No.”

“It's not for sahibs like you to hear of such things. But very high Firinghi (Eurasian) Sahibs and Tommy Sahibs have received blessings after vowing an offering at the feet of the god Bhujangeshwar. Anyway, I lay without food or drink at the feet of Bhujangeshwar. ‘Lord,’ I cried, ‘unless you save me who will?’ After seven days the god deigned to look upon me. In a dream he told me, ‘Go and marry a good girl, it will get well after co-habitation with your wife.’”

Not knowing whether to laugh or to cry, I brought tears to my eyes. What innocent girl's life had this fool made futile?

With great pride Brindaban continued, “The greatness of the Hindu religion! I married a twelve-year-old untainted blossom! In no time the disease left my body just in the way Saturn was cast out of the body of the Raja Srivatsa!”

“But,” I queried, “did you find that after leaving your body the disease took shelter in your wife's?”

Brindaban picked up the napkin from the table and wiped his eyes. In a voice hoarse as if with tears, he said, “She was chaste, a Lakshmi-like queen among ideal wives. Her allotted time on earth had expired; so resting her head on her husband's feet her soul discarded its

old garment of a body!"

I said sarcastically, "Then I suppose you sought out a new garment!"

"One doesn't have to seek it, it comes of its own accord. The gentleman's daughter was grown-up and he couldn't marry her off. Mother asked me to relieve him of his burden. I too felt that unless I married I'd go to the bad again."

I went out with my childhood friend. I wanted to laugh so much that I felt I would burst unless I gave vent to it in the open air.

"Look here, Brindaban!" I gradually broached the subject, "You've seen my babourchi (Mohammedan cook); he can cook neither pure Indian nor European food properly. The kind of food which goes in this country by the name of European food, I can't stand. Pure Indian food is far better than that."

"Then," Brindaban proposed, "you might keep a thakur (Brahmin cook)."

"Thakur? No, not a thakur. I might keep a thakurani."

Brindaban stopped short. "What? What will you keep if you find one?"

"A female cook."

"Go on!"

"Why?"

“Go on! You’re joking!”

“Really. I want someone, food cooked by whose hands will give me a sweet satisfaction; someone who will serve nectar with my food. That person will surely not be some man who cooks in a mess or boarding house! Oh! How awful that would be.”

Still Brindaban remarked, “Go on!”

I said, “Whatever you might say, if I could get a beautiful and ripe young woman as a cook, I would be willing to give away Samarkand and Bokhara! Even a salary of a hundred rupees!”

“One—hundred—rupees! Swear in the name of your mother?”

“Why, what’s there to be so surprised about?”

“No! Nothing at all! Especially, when my own salary is only seventy-five rupees.”

I felt ashamed. Yet it must be admitted that the Goddess of Wealth was quite kindly disposed towards this man who had only studied up to the third class in school.

Brindaban said, “It won’t do if she’s just a cook, she must be beautiful and . . .”

“A ripe young woman.”

“Must she be a ripe young woman?”

“Otherwise how can an ordinary affair like eating be filled with aesthetic delight?”

“I understand.”

I thought perhaps Brindaban had understood the meaning of the word aesthetic. But it was not so.

"I understand your motive." Brindaban gave a wagging laugh.

Anyway, I did not have to take the trouble of explaining. I asked, "Do you know of any such woman?"

"Don't I!" said Brindaban with a knowing side glance.

"Then," I said becoming very impatient, "send her here as soon as you get to Calcutta. I'm having unspeakable inconvenience over my food."

"I understand." He smiled mischievously and continued, "I thought that a man who had a degree in Commerce from England ought to bear a good character."

"But you find that the man believes in suiting his own convenience!"

We sat down to take rest under a banyan tree, on the cement seat round its trunk. Brindaban began, "I know a girl, her name is Subarna (gold; golden complexion), and she is as beautiful as her name. She is as bright as the image of a goddess, one's eyes are dazzled looking at her."

"A spinster or a widow?"

"A wife."

I really felt disappointed and said, "Then let it be."

"First hear everything. She's married, but has nothing to do with her husband. There you are! I've got to frighten you again; her husband suffers from a nasty disease."

My face became pale and distorted. Brindaban went

on in great glee, "It's really funny. He had gone somewhere—to Dacca or Chittagong, and came back with blisters on his feet and hands. He said contact with the steamer's boiler had given him those blisters. Subarna, however, believed him. How old was she then? Twelve or thirteen perhaps. The way she nursed him is what one really does call nursing. But with all the nursing those blisters from the boiler didn't get well. Gradually his whole body became covered with them. Haripada is the owner of sixteen houses in Calcutta. The medical treatment he obtained for himself is beyond the means of a contractor like me. Nobody told him about Bhujangeshwar so he has kept his wife carefully apart, hasn't even touched her, he's such a fool!"

I mentally applauded this Haripada.

"By the time the wife reached the age when she was ready to live with him, her husband was incompetent; gradually she became fed up and contemptuous. She had nursed him not a little. Where was the reward for all the service she had given, she wanted to know. This question rose in her mind as a result of too much novel-reading. Then one day she went to bathe in the Ganges and got lost!"

I remarked, "The result of reading novels!"

"What else?" Brindaban asked excitedly, "Why else are women grouching in every home today? I haven't seen a single book fit to be handed to my wife, not even the books written by women."

“ You do one thing,” I proposed, “ Buy her book written by someone who is neither a man nor a woman and the bride of your home will always stay at home.”

Brindaban did not catch the joke. “ That’ll be the best I’ll take down a list from you, Lalit. You must see that we’ve a duty towards your bowdi (elder brother’s wife. Friends’ wives are also addressed similarly).

I made up a list in my mind. “ Tell me, what happened to Subarna afterwards.”

“ What could happen? She was caught in Benares. All the neighbours tried to make her see reason and said so many sweet things to her. But she had only one answer to give: ‘ I can’t lead the life of a nun; which of you leads an ascetic’s life, tell me?’ In shame, all of us slipped off to our homes!”

“ And Subarna?”

“ Subarna was sent to her maternal uncle’s house. She has no father, and her mother lives there. But are novels easy things to get over? Unless first cousins fall in love, how can there be any social progress! When her aunt got to know of it, she sent Subarna back to her husband. In the meantime Haripada had grown sick of life. I told him where to find the Bhujangeshwar Siva. He too received in a dream the exact advice given me. But Subarna has turned crazy seeing too many cinemas. She says, ‘ No, just because I want to enjoy life completely, it doesn’t mean that I want to become diseased.’ So you hear what she says?”

A little while ago I had mentally applauded the husband. Now I gave vocal applause to the wife.

"You give praise to that disobedient, unchaste wife?"

"Anyway, you tell me the end of her story."

"End?" Brindaban said with great delight. "We married off Haripada again with great eclat. It was only the other day, I've still not digested the grand feast I had. I must say Haripada's people do know how to give a feast."

"But what happened to Subarna?"

Brindaban said in a tone of disgust, "What can happen, tell me? Is there anything else for a Hindu woman except her husband? You'll see everything will be all right after a while."

Feeling more hopeful, I asked, "Then everything hasn't become all right yet?"

"No, sometimes she comes to my home and makes a terrible fuss. She says, 'Brindaban Babu, you do something for me, or else I'll become a prostitute!'"

"Good—why don't you do something for her?"

Brindaban touched his forehead with hands folded together and said, "For one thing she's a Brahmin, and another, she's someone else's wife."

On our way back I asked, "Brindaban, tell me the truth. Subarna hasn't got that disease, has she?"

"As far as I know she hasn't."

"But I want to know for certain."

"I don't know for certain."

"Then she'll have to be examined by a doctor. Will you be able to take charge of that?"

"Who? I?" Brindaban's face shrank to nothing.

"Yes, you. I'm not going to Calcutta, you are."

"Bah!"

"Don't say bah! Tell me whether you can do it or not?"

"Wait, let me think."

"There's nothing to think over. Has Subarna given up her husband or hasn't she?"

"It amounts to that."

"How old is she? Has she reached majority?"

"Nineteen or twenty."

"Then that's all right. Tell her to get lost again."

Brindaban said, "To tell the truth, that's what Hari-pada also would prefer. Oh, the scandal! It'll just be complete if she turns a prostitute! Then Haripada won't be able to show his face in Calcutta! Even some of his friends will visit her!"

"Some of his neighbours too?"

"They too."

"What are you saying? Those preachers of asceticism also?"

"Why not? There's no such thing as chastity for men!"

I nearly went mad with rage. I said, "Then they are all waiting like vultures for that girl to die!"

Brindaban was startled and said, "Bless her, such

beauty, such youth and she'll die?"

"To me her becoming a prostitute implies the death of her humanity."

"All that," said Brindaban in a tone of firm belief, "is in the hands of God. If there were no prostitutes, there wouldn't be any sinners, and if there weren't any sinners, whom would God redeem?"

It was useless to argue with a man who reasoned like that. I silently pondered over the problem of Subarna. If she became a prostitute, she would die of the very disease she wanted to avoid. There was a moral law above the one which was called as such by society. That moral law was a heroic one, and those who acted according to it would one day receive honour in society.

The whole affair which began as a joke ended thus. I put pressure on Brindaban, saying, "You send her here, I'll have her examined by a doctor myself."

Brindaban was stunned. He said, "I'd better tell you now, why I've come to you. You must give me a letter of recommendation to my Burra-sahib. I came running a hundred and fifty miles because there's a vacancy for a hundred and fifty rupee job."

"But," I objected, "I don't know your Burra-sahib, does he know me?"

"All right, all right!" Brindaban said patting my back, "Even if he doesn't know you, he will know your position in the bank. You'll have to give it today, understand? I'll go back by the midday train."

It was a month after Brindaban had departed. I had completely forgotten what I had said to him. Samad was cooking for me, I was eating well, living in comfort, and quite happily. Father had come and urged me to get married but I had not agreed. Being a student of economics, could I agree to marry on this income? If marriage implied birth-control, then it would be an excellent proposition, but our girls do not like a wifehood which leaves out motherhood.

About this time, one night when I had returned from the club and was about to enter my sitting-room, I stopped short in utter bewilderment. Who was this lady?

A woman in the house of a bachelor was like a piece of fish in a Hindu widow's cooking-pot. What would people say? I happened to be a respectable gentleman, a club member.

But the earth did not open to swallow me. Perspiration streamed down me. There seemed to be some dispute between my two feet as to whether I should stay or run away. On the other hand, my eyes were snared and I stared.

What beauty! She was bending over a teapoy and in the light of a Petromax lamp was looking with rapt attention at the illustrations in some foreign journal. A very strict restraint bound her person, otherwise it might have scattered itself in all directions and melted into nothingness. She was like a golden rose in full bloom.

But who was she? Why was she in my room?

She felt my presence and realised that I was standing there. She got up from her chair and looked at me. She did not say anything, but seemed to indicate that I could come in. Like one drawn by a magnet, I entered and sat down a little away from her. She too sat down, but she continued staring at me, as if she were appraising me with her eyes. I did not know whether she liked me or not, but I wanted to find out. It seemed that the tables were turned and I was a marriageable girl and she a man wanting to marry. I was feeling most uncomfortable. I ought to have said something; but just as one cannot talk in a dream, I could not. When the desire to speak became irrepressible, the dream must be broken. I was not eager to shatter such a dream.

Being the object of her examining eyes, I became like a strictly-watched prisoner in my own home. Perhaps the whole night would have passed like this. But how could the master's faithful bearer allow such a thing? He came and asked, "Shall I bring a drink for you?"

I started guiltily and said, "What? Yes, bring me a chota-peg. And you, of course, you'll have tea?"

She replied stiffly, "I've come here to make tea and not to drink it."

I suddenly remembered. Was this then—? I had to utter the question and asked her. She replied without the slightest embarrassment, "I am Subarna."

No one could possibly sense the shame and embarrassment I felt then. Subarna surely knew what I wanted

her for. What did this grown-up lady think of me? And knowing what she did, that she should have come—how utterly shameless of her!

I was afraid to look into her eyes. I said politely, “No, no, that can’t be. Why should you make the tea?”

The thick curtain of her lashes lifted and her bright sharp gaze fell on my eyes like the rays of a torch. She said, “Believe me, I have no disease.”

I became terribly embarrassed and said, “Oh! I—I didn’t—didn’t mean that.” With this I hiccupped in confusion.

She then said, “If you give me permission, I’ll prepare the tea and bring it.”

I said, “No, no, Subarna Devi. Why should you take the trouble when my servants are here.”

She became disappointed and said, “Then with what right shall I stay here?”

I really could not understand how anyone could marry a woman with whom he was completely unacquainted. My evil mind said that it was sheer hypocrisy. The sense of shame and sin connected with sex-desire which lurked in every mind had to be eradicated by a religious ceremony and the chanting of hymns. Then self-deception and the deceiving of others became easy. This desire was no longer mere sex-desire, but was transformed into a practice of one’s religion, a means of providing heirs to the family, a stern duty and so on! Thereafter one no longer required permission for laying hands

on a strange woman—the religious ceremony itself was the permit!

But for all that if there was any way of marrying Subarna I would have married her. Alas! The courage, the shame, the joy of giving this woman, made in the image of a goddess, a share of my bed without hypocrisy, without having any pretence in one's mind, was not for an ordinary person like me. It was fit only for a hero like Arjuna (one of the five Pandava brothers in the epic Mahabharata).

No, I was no hero. It would have been much better if I had not tried to show off my heroism before Brindaban.

Finding me silent she said, "Then there is no room for me here?"

What answer was there to this? The matter would end if I just said, "No." But how could I say that she should go? Since my return from England, I had not had the chance to talk freely with a woman. My life was weighed down with continual care not to slip up on any point of social etiquette. Besides, there was such a dearth of women in this country, that one never got a chance of mixing with any except old European ladies or dowdy anglicised Bengalee matrons. Since this girl had come from a hundred and fifty miles away, why should I not spend an hour and a half in conversation with her?

"Look here," I began but could not proceed any

further. I felt she was getting impatient. "Look here, what has Brindaban told—"

"Brindaban Babu told me that you were looking for a woman to be your cook. I am a Brahmin's daughter and I think I cook fairly well. But, of course, English food is quite another matter."

Now I found an excuse and said, "But that's what I really want. I, you understand, am back from England. I don't eat much except beef."

She replied unmoved, "If anyone shows me how, I'll cook it for you."

I got alarmed and said, "Then, you see, it's not just a question of food but drinks too. I'm terribly particular about all that, understand—like the older generation of Indians back from England."

"I can manage that also if I am given instructions."

What could I say to this? Still, I tried to frighten her in as many ways as I could. I told her, "I am terribly bad-tempered. When I am in a temper I whip whoever comes in front of me; otherwise I can't go to sleep!"

After all this time she gave a faint smile and said, "Very well. In that case you can give me also a few strokes!"

I scratched my head and replied, "Salary—I shan't be able to give you a salary! I didn't say I was going to dismiss my present cook just because I asked for a woman-cook. Unless I pay him, will he teach you how to cook European food? How can I give you a salary over

and above his—you understand—unless there be anything left over from mine? But it's all spent away in eating and drinking."

"All right, I agree to serve without any salary."

I wanted to say, as the Bengalee saying goes: Subarna, I will place you on my head and keep you there; everything that I have is yours! But I felt a terrible shame in thinking of living with her. Thank God, I did not cause a disaster by becoming sentimental.

I kept silent for a long while.

She got up and came and fell at my feet saying, "Believe me. I haven't got that disease." Her eyes were full of tears. How very charming she looked! I was gazing enchanted at her and forgot to take away my feet. I did not have the courage to take her hands in mine and raise her up.

I hardened my heart and said, "But you are another man's wife."

She raised her head and said, "No. I am yours, your wife only." Her tears could no longer be checked. I remembered that perhaps she had not had any food the whole day in the train! She kissed my feet.

So, there was so much softness hidden behind her hard exterior. But what romance was this! I was neither an artist nor a musician, I was a prosaic man with a job in a bank. Even that job was not such a big one as Brindaban had supposed; that is, I was not the Agent of the bank. Was I fit to be the hero of a romance?

When Samad brought in the tea, she quickly let go my feet and rustling her sari went and sat in her chair. What did that rogue Samad think? He put down the tea and salaamed us both in an exaggeratedly grave manner. Perhaps, going outside he laughed and joked about it with Sukdeoram bearer who was sitting in the verandah ostensibly polishing shoes and glancing askance at us.

I said, "Subarna, you are a most unfortunate woman, but it is beyond my power to rid you of your sorrows. In a short time you will desire to become a mother. How can I countenance such a desire?"

She replied, "That can wait. I haven't thought about it."

I said with a laugh, "Even if you don't think about it, Nature will. Her laws are immutable."

Still she insisted, "Let what will be, be. What's there to worry about? Isn't anybody else becoming a mother in this world?"

"But society will hold your child in dishonour."

"While you are there?"

"What am I after all? People far greater than myself fight shy of becoming the father of such a child and run away for fear."

Perhaps she did not quite believe it. What was there to be frightened about in such a simple matter? She seemed to be pondering over something absent-mindedly. She did not have any tea.

"Have some tea, do please." I pressed her. "Then I'll see you off and put you on the train."

She flared up, "I didn't come here to have tea!" Then she stood up and said, "And I know how to get on and off a train!"

I met Brindaban again two years afterwards. After talking about this and that, I asked, "Well, what's the news about Subarna?" He exclaimed in surprise, "Subarna!" Then he said with a laugh, "Oh yes, Subarna, that cook of yours?"

Filled with remorse mingled with shame, I said, "Yes—she who came to importune me!"

"Her name is no longer Subarna; she is Farzund-un-nissa now. Her husband is a fruit-seller from Peshawar—Abdul Qadir. She has a little son now—Zulfi-qar. The bibi (Muslim lady) observes strict purdah. Shame! Shame on her! That she should turn Mohammedan in the end!"



‘BONOFUL’



PARIBARTAN
OR
The Change

MY WHOLE MOUTH BECAME BITTER AFTER EATING KHEJURI Gur Sandesh (a Bengali sweet flavoured with date molasses), yet they were good sweets; but you had better listen to the story right from the beginning.

Harimohon was a rich man and there was no lack of money. So I knew he would not die for lack of either care or treatment. All the treatment that could possibly be bought with money was being obtained. Two famous doctors were coming twice every day to look after Harimohan. Perhaps two nurses might also have come to nurse him but his wife, Sarama, would not agree to it. She nursed him herself, and so well, that even the two doctors had to admit that there was no lack of proper nursing. It was doubtful whether a paid nurse could have been more sincere.

But the disease was a terrible one—tuberculosis. He was spitting blood and every day there was a rise of temperature. His sputum had been examined and the examination had revealed tuberculosis germs, there could be no room even for the slightest doubt. He would probably receive proper medical attention because he had money. But no one felt that it would yield any results. It rather seemed that the curtain was about to fall on the drama of his life.

Harimohon was my childhood friend; in school, we used to sit side by side in the class and gradually we

became friends. I do not know why that friendship still remained unchanged, because friendships between the rich and the poor are so easily broken. Anyway I used to go and see him every day.

Also, I had specially to go and see him every day because, besides his wife, Harimohon had no one else to call his own in the world. Of course, he had money enough and wherever there is sugar there is never any dearth of ants; and ants of both sexes came and went. But, as soon as it became known that he had tuberculosis, gradually the crowd of ants disappeared. Perhaps they went to seek sugar elsewhere. In brief, I was the only one who remained. My formal relationship with Sarama as a friend's wife had naturally become more intimate. Now I feel that perhaps it would have been better if it had not changed.

Harimohon was sitting and coughing in his bed, the terrible hacking cough of a tuberculosis patient.

When the spell of coughing stopped, he said, "My throat is very bad, and I am tired of painting, gargling and what not! Don't know when this damned thing is going to stop—"

I said, "Of course, it will stop, why do you get frightened so easily?"

"I am not the one to get frightened. But you know how irritating this is." After saying these few words he

started coughing again.

For a little while we both remained silent.

Harimohon said, "Nothing was found in the sputum. I knew they wouldn't find anything. I think it's only an attack of 'flu.'"

Sarama entered with a cup of milk.

Harimohon asked after another fit of coughing was over, "What is that?"

"Milk."

"God! Milk again?"

"But the doctors told me to give you milk."

"Why can't you let me be, for a little while? I've just—" again he started coughing. When it stopped he continued, "I've just taken medicine a little while ago, after which I gargled, then my throat was sprayed, then I drank some fruit juice, and now again—milk!"

"The doctors said that you'll get well very quickly if you take nourishing food. Besides, I haven't brought a lot of milk, please drink it." Sarama held the cup in front of him.

Harimohon drank two sips and said, "I won't have any more. Take it away for heaven's sake! I haven't any room in my stomach."

"Please do drink a little more, this is such a tiny cup!" Then turning towards me she said, "Do tell him to drink it up!"

I too requested him.

"All right, I'll have another sip for your sake." But

he did not drink more than half of the cup.

Sarama took the cup and went to the next room. I got up, it was late, besides I had something to say to Sarama. The doctors had told me that Harimohon must not be told about his daily rise of temperature. I told him, "It's past 9 o'clock, I must go now, I'll come again tomorrow."

"All right," and Harimohon turned round in his bed.

I entered the next room, but was stunned with surprise by what I saw. Sarama was drinking the left-over milk in Harimohon's cup. I asked, "What on earth do you think you're doing?"

Sarama was a little ashamed of being caught like this. She blushed and said, "Oh, that's nothing." Then she recovered herself and said very calmly, "When you've seen it, it can't be helped, but don't tell any one."

"Oh! I won't tell any one; but why are you drinking that milk?"

Sarama smiled and replied, "There's no harm in drinking my husband's left-over milk, is there?"

"No harm?" All that I knew about this disease, how infectious it was, I told her. Sarama listened to all that I had to say. Then she turned a pair of bright eyes on my face and said, "True. But can you explain one thing to me? Supposing he dies, is it any use my living? Even if

I had a child to live for, it might have been different." I gave her a lot of good advice for quite a long time. She listened to everything quietly with a smile.

Harimohon's illness gradually became worse. It could no longer be withheld from him that he had tuberculosis. After he learnt this, he became very restless. The two doctors who were seeing him also got worried and called in two more doctors for consultation. The four of them declared that X-ray plates should be taken. That was duly done. The X-ray revealed that only one lung was affected and the other was still without any taint. If he went to a sanatorium and underwent an operation, it was more than likely that he would get well. There was no lack of money; so within a short time Harimohon went away to the sanatorium at Dharampur and Sarama accompanied him.

After this I did not hear much about Harimohon. At first we wrote to each other, but gradually the correspondence had ceased. He was better, that was all I knew. Gradually I lost interest in him and he too did not bother to keep me informed about himself. One day I suddenly heard from someone that Harimohon had gone to Switzerland. Why, for what, I did not know. I thought he had money, why should he not go?

My life as a clerk went on as usual, Who was I to poke my nose into the affairs of the rich and prosperous? Besides, Harimohon had not left any address.

Ten years passed. Harimohon had gradually faded from my memory. Suddenly I got a letter from him one day. It was a short note which said: "Dear Naresh, I will reach Calcutta next Tuesday, come and see me if you can.—Yours Harimohon."

From the address on the letter I saw that Harimohon had written from his country home. I had no idea when he had returned home from Switzerland.

On the appointed Tuesday I went to his house in the evening after office. He was at home and welcomed me warmly. I was absolutely surprised to see how well he looked, how strong and healthy he was! Who would say that this man had once suffered from tuberculosis!

I asked, "You're completely well now, aren't you?"

"Yes, completely."

Then he told me all about the doctor whose treatment had cured him and became exuberant over the history of his amazing recovery.

"You went to Switzerland, didn't you?" I asked.

"Yes."

"How did you like it?"

"Very much. It's far more beautiful than what one imagines reading its descriptions in books. Come on,

let's go upstairs."

We went upstairs. The next moment Harimohon began shouting, "Sarama, Sarama, Naresh has come, bring some tea and some food. Naresh, sit down, do sit down."

I sat down rather diffidently on his expensive and luxurious sofa.

Harimohon went on saying, "Now tell me all about yourself. You've changed a lot. Well! By Jove! The hair over your temples have grown grey. How did you age so early? There—I mean in the West, youth begins at fifty, believe me?" He gave a stress on the word "begins."

I did not tell him that I was getting slow fever every day and the doctors were suspecting that I too may have contracted tuberculosis. I only said, "There's a lot of difference between this country and that! Besides, why do you forget brother, that I've been grinding and grinding at a clerk's job for the last twenty years? Never had time even to breathe properly."

"But what difference does that make? Hard work doesn't make a man thin!" And he burst out into a roof-shaking, loud laughter. Harimohon's laugh was very characteristic of him; it was no less loud today, if not louder. I felt slightly jealous of his exuberant health and youthful mind. It seemed that he had not got any older than what he was at twenty-five.

Sarama entered with a plate of food in her hand. I

was still more surprised to see Sarama. Can any one change so much even in ten years? Sarama seemed embarrassed by my frowning stare.

"I'll go and get the tea," she put down the plate on a small table in front of me and went away. Who was she?

I told Harimohon, "Sarama can't even be recognised, she has changed so completely in these ten years!"

Harimohon gazed at me for some time then he said, "Yes, she has changed. But the Sarama you knew and this Sarama are not the same person. That Sarama died a long time ago. She too had tuberculosis and as luck would have it—in both lungs." He paused and then said, "In the end her intestines were also affected. I spent a lot of money on her treatment, but she didn't live!"

We both remained silent for a while. Harimohon spoke again, "I couldn't help it, I had to marry again. In the end I found someone with the same name. You see, that name stuck to my memory and I couldn't think of replacing it by another—I simply couldn't. I know she won't return again, yet that name—"

He stopped short.

Sarama was entering through the door with a tea-tray in her hand. As soon as she put a plate heaped with a variety of food before Harimohon, he said, "I won't eat so much. What a lot you've brought!"

I heard Sarama say, "You must eat properly; you aren't eating at all these days!" Then turning to me she

said, "Do request your friend to eat properly. He has begun neglecting his health again."

"Have you got the Khejuri Gur Sandesh for Naresh?" asked Harimohon. "He's very fond of it!"

"Yes, I brought some for him." She smiled and pushed a plate full of Sandesh towards me.



BIBHUTI BHUSAN BANERJEE



MEGHA-MALLAR
OR
The Monsoon Melody

A CROWD OF MEN AND WOMEN HAD GATHERED IN THE courtyard of the Dasaparamita temple that day to see a snake-charmer's performance. There, for the first time, Pradumna saw the man. It was the last day of the month of Jaistha. Women from villages on all sides had come to worship Dasaparamita. For this occasion many snake-charmers, singers and magicians had collected in the temple. Many garland-sellers had brought ornaments made of flowers to sell to the women. A merchant from Magadha had brought expensive silk sarees, and his shop was the most crowded with women that day. Pradumna had heard that on this occasion, a famous singer and veen (a guitar-like string instrument) player would come to the Paramita temple. He had gone there to look for him, but after searching throughout the day, Pradumna had not been able to spot him out in the crowd.

A little before evening, a snake-charmer began showing an exceptionally strange display of snakes in the courtyard before a group of fun-loving women. Gradually, a big crowd gathered. Pradumna also stood there but he did not give much attention to this snake-charmer's display. He was keenly watching each man in that crowd, hoping that he might be able to discern the player from his looks and mannerisms. After watching for a long time, his eyes fell on a middle-aged man, who was staring at Pradumna standing in the midst of the crowd. His clothes were worn out and dirty. Somehow or other, Pradumna felt that this was the singer. Pradumna was

just going to push through the crowd in order to reach him, when he raised his hand and signed to Pradumna to move out of the crowd. When they came out, the man asked him, "I am the singer from Abanti—Suradas. Aren't you looking for me?"

Pradumna was a little surprised. How did this man know what was in his mind? Pradumna told him respectfully, yes, he was looking for him.

The man said, "You are not unknown to me. Once upon a time I was very friendly with your father. Whenever I went to Benares I never came back without seeing him. I have seen you too when you were a child."

"Where are you staying here?"

"Do you know the ruined temple near the river?"

"Yes, I do. Didn't a sannyasi live there before?"

"He still lives there. You can go there any day and see me. Where do you live?"

"I study in the monastery here. I've been here three years. How long will you stay in the temple?"

"I'll tell you later. You come and see me one of these days."

Pradumna bid him farewell and went away.

It was not yet evening. The temple was on a small hill. The girls were returning home down the two roads on both sides of the hill. Pradumna's eyes seemed to search for someone in the crowd of girls, but the next

moment he left them behind and began descending rapidly. Acharya (professor) Shilabrata was a stern and hot-tempered man. Already, finding Pradumna a little more restless and gayer than the other students, he kept him in stricter discipline, and if on top of that he returned late to the monastery, would he be let off easily?

As soon as he turned round the corner, the barrier of the hill on the left was removed and the open country came into view. Pradumna saw that the high spire of the river-side temple was visible in the distance. Hazy against the shadow-laden sky above the temple spire, flocks of birds were winging their way home. Suddenly from behind somebody gave a slight pull at Pradumna's clothes. As soon as Pradumna turned round, a streak of mischief flashed across the eyes of the person who had pulled at his clothes. She was a young girl; she wore a blue saree wound round her slim champa-coloured body. A garland of flowers encircled her coil of hair. Pradumna asked in a tone of surprise, "When did you come Sunanda? I searched so much, but where—I didn't see you."

At first the girl blushed with shyness, then she said in a hurt tone, "As if you had come to search for me! As if I didn't see that you were going about staring at the faces of all the snake-charmers and magicians!"

"Really, Sunanda, I did look for you too. I looked for you when I was coming down, and I had looked for you before also. Who did you come with?"

A group of girls were now seen coming down the

road from the top of the hill. The moment Sunanda saw them, she left Pradumna behind and began walking down quickly.

Just behind him were this group of unknown girls, Pradumna felt that it would not be seemly to follow Sunanda now. So he stood there for a while, then he raised his head feeling both angry and disappointed and went proudly leaping away.

The sound of the bells of evening worship in the Dasaparamita temple had not yet faded out; in the distant curve of the river, a faint light sprang up in the ruined temple. Men and women returning from the festival descended into the moonlit field and gradually disappeared into the distance. Pradumna began walking still faster.

There was a tree beside the road. As he was passing it Pradumna felt that someone was standing behind it. When he went forward a little, he stopped short hearing a burst of familiar sweet soft laughter. He saw that Sunanda was standing beneath the tree; the shimmering light of the moon which streamed on Sunanda through the interstices of leaves, had woven a net of light and darkness all around her. When Pradumna looked at her, she swung her head and cried out, "It would have served you right! You'd have walked past and not seen me."

Pradumna felt very pleased seeing Sunanda but he said, "No, of course I wouldn't have seen you. You think it's very wonderful of you to have hidden behind the tree.

And even if I hadn't seen you, what of it? I'm very cross with you Sunanda, really."

Sunanda retorted, "The fault is yours and you're the person to be angry! Do you remember what you said the other day? Then all those snake-charmers and magicians! How awful! How can you go near them? They wear such dirty clothes. I never go anywhere near them."

"You're a rich man's daughter, for you everything is different. But tell me, what was it that you wanted to say?"

Sunanda replied, "Go on! You needn't pretend any more. Just think what it can be? Didn't you tell me something the other day?"

Pradumna thought for a while and then cried, "Oh, I know, that flute?"

Sunanda replied in a hurt tone, "Just think, did you say it or not? I've been waiting in the temple since mid-day. For one thing—he comes late and then . . . go away!"

This time Pradumna burst out laughing. He said, "Tell me Sunanda, if you saw me, why didn't you call me?"

"But was I alone? At midday, of course, I came alone, but then you hadn't come. Then, all the girls from our village came. How was I to call you?"

"All right, I'll admit the fault is mine. But the snake-charmers and magicians you are talking about again and again, I wasn't looking for them. I'd heard that a great

veen-player had come from Abanti. You know that for a long time I've been longing to learn to play the veen. That's why I was going round looking for him, and I have found him too. He is staying here in the river-side temple. But tell me, where is your father?"

"Father went to Kausambi three or four days ago—the Maharaja sent for him."

Pradumna suddenly laughed out loud and said, "Oh, that's why; otherwise I was thinking how can Sunanda be out so late—"

Sunanda quickly put her two hands over Pradumna's mouth and looking embarrassed, she said, "Quiet, quiet, have you no sense at all? All the people will be returning just now after the evening worship."

Pradumna controlled his laughter and said, "But I'll surely tell your father this time when he comes back—"

Sunanda cried angrily, "All right, tell him! He knows that I stay in the temple till the evening worship."

Pradumna caught hold of Sunanda's beautiful flower-like right hand in his own and said, "All right. I shan't tell him. Come Sunanda, I'll play the flute for you, it's with me. Truly, I did bring it to play to you. I was looking for him only because I really want to learn to play the veen."

When they came to the edge of the river, however, Pradumna somehow seemed to lose all his enthusiasm. He did play the flute but it seemed he was playing mechanically without any heart in it. So many times they

had sat together by themselves like this; just because Sunanda loved to hear Pradumna's flute, whenever Pradumna came out of the monastery he always brought the flute with him. So many times the lazy dreamy tunes of Pradumna's flute had made them forget time, and without their being conscious of it, the noon-tide sunshine had faded into the darkness of evening. When they were together, Sunanda had never seen Pradumna as listless as he was today. But somehow, Pradumna could not help thinking again and again about that shabbily-dressed, strange-looking singer—Suradas. -

The next morning Pradumna went to the ruined temple by the river. The image of its deity had disappeared long ago. There were big cracks all over the temple which were full of snakes' nests. Usually none of the people from the neighbouring villages ever went there. A sannyasi had been living there for the last seven or eight months, since then a few of his followers occasionally came and went, that was why the road leading to the temple was in a comparatively better condition.

Pradumna met Suradas inside the half-dark temple. He seemed very pleased to see Pradumna and said, "Let's go and sit outside, it's very dark here."

After coming outside, Suradas looked intently at Pradumna's face in the light then said as if to himself. "Yes, only you can do it. I knew it."

The uneasiness which the image of Suradas had created in Pradumna's mind, before coming to him, gradually passed away while he was in his company. He saw that though Suradas' face was a little ugly, it bore the mark of genius.

Suradas said, "I thought that you would come today. Well, your father was a very famous singer, have you learnt anything?"

Pradumna replied shyly, "I can play the flute a little."

Suradas said with enthusiasm, "You should be able to. There are few people in this country who haven't heard of your father. At the time of every festival, invitations from Kausambi always came to him. Yes, I've heard that you too can play Megha-Mallar (The Monsoon Melody) very well on the flute."

Pradumna replied with humility, "It isn't much that I know. I play what comes to my mind, but occasionally I do play the Megha-Mallar."

Suradas said, "Where, let me hear what you've learnt."

Pradumna's flute was always with him. He never knew when he might meet Sunanda. He began playing. In his childhood his father had taught him the Ragas and Raginees with the greatest care. Besides, Pradumna had a natural talent for music. His playing was very sweet indeed. Perhaps Suradas had not expected so much of him. He embraced Pradumna and said, "It's not surprising that Indradumna's son should be so gifted. I

realise it's you who'll be able to do it. Of course, I knew this before."

Pradumna's handsome young face reddened with a blush. After talking over this and that, when Pradumna got up to go, Suradas told him, "Listen Pradumna, I've something private to tell you. I've looked for you before also, because I wanted to tell you this. It's good that I've found you. But, before I say anything you'll have to promise me that you won't tell anyone about it."

Pradumna was extremely surprised. He had known this man only for a day. What secret could he have to tell him? He replied, "Without knowing what it is how can I—"

"Don't worry—if it was anything that could harm you I wouldn't have told you." Pradumna felt very curious to know what it was. So he promised that he would not tell anyone what Suradas told him.

Suradas lowered his voice and began: "You know that big mound on the bend of the river and the big field in front of it? In ancient times that mound was a temple of Saraswati—the Goddess of Learning. I've heard that at that time, all the great singers of this country would first come to that temple and render worship to the Goddess before they started on their career. That was a long time ago—after that the temple became a ruin and gradually changed into that mound. If one sits on that mound on the night of the full moon in the month of Ashar and can sing or play Megha-Mallar flawlessly,

the Goddess Saraswati herself appears before the musician. Nobody knows about this here. On the full moon nights of these three months—Ashar, Sraban and Bhadra, if one can bring her down to the earth, then through her blessing the musician becomes a master in his art—nothing of music remains unknown to him. But, there is one condition, the musician who asks for a blessing must be unmarried. So I'm suggesting, that on the coming full moon night, you and I will try for this. What do you say?"

Pradumna was absolutely taken aback on hearing this. How could it be? Acharya Basubrata while lecturing on Art had often said that Saraswati who was imagined as the presiding deity of all the Arts by the Hindus, was only an imaginary being. This conception had no relation with reality. To really be able to see her—could it be possible? Pradumna kept silent.

Suradas asked a little eagerly, "Have you any objection to my proposal?"

"No, it's not that. I was wondering how could it be possible that—"

"You rest assured about that. See the truth of what I say with your own eyes. If you've no objection I'll make all arrangements on the night of the coming full moon."

Pradumna had become quite bewildered with both surprise and curiosity after hearing what Suradas told him. He nodded his head and said, "All right, you make

the arrangements, I'll come."

"Good, I'm very happy. You must come here occasionally. In preparation for this, you also have to do a few things. I'll tell you what you have to do."

Pradumna nodded again in assent, asked leave from Suradas, then took the road to the monastery in a worried state of mind. He was thinking: the Goddess Saraswati herself! The colour of her skin was supposed to be like a white lotus, who knew how beautiful was her face! Of course, Acharya Basubrata said . . .

That year a heavy monsoon descended on the wood by the Bhadrabati river—full of teak, piyal and naktamal trees. On the night of the full moon in Ashar, Pradumna went with Suradas to the field beside the river. When they reached it, clouds had covered the entire sky. Everything could be seen indistinctly in the tremulous darkness. As instructed by Suradas, Pradumna bathed in the river and changed his clothes. From his rituals Pradumna realised that Suradas was a tantric (a follower of the Shakta cult). There was a vikshu (monk) in their monastery who was a disciple of Yogacharya Padma-Sambhav. From him, Pradumna had heard of some of the rituals of the tantrics.

Suradas had brought with him a number of garlands woven with red hibiscuses, some of which he put round his own neck, and the others—he asked Pradumna to

wear. He lit a lamp by placing a wick and some oil in a small skull. There were so many things to be done that Pradumna became tired with helping him to get ready for the worship. But he was so curious to find out how the whole thing would end—he did not even realise that there could be anything to be afraid of, in being alone with a tantric, in the darkness of the night. The worship ended very late at night. Suradas said, “Pradumna, my part is over, you begin yours now; but be very careful, the whole thing depends on your skill.”

There was a hungry look in his eyes which Pradumna did not like. However, he sat down to play the Megha-Mallar on his flute, concentrating his whole mind on it.

Silence reigned everywhere. In the darkness nothing could be seen in the field which lay in front. The breeze touched the leaves and branches of the teak forest and murmured weirdly. Beyond the big field on the horizon, at the edge of the teak forest, the night had laid its mantle on the dark grassy bed of the earth's heart.

Suddenly the darkness in the field lifted and it was flooded with a soft light. Pradumna saw in surprise that in the middle of the field, surrounded by an aureole which glowed with the light of a hundred full moons, stood an incomparably beautiful, majestic young woman—fair as the colour of moonlight. Her deep black hair flowed down carelessly by the side of her wonderfully beautiful neck; the long curling lashes of her lovely big eyes seemed to have been painted with the brush of some

heavenly artist; her snow-white arms were encircled with celestial flower ornaments; chains of precious jewels, half-hidden in her blue sarree, shimmered round her waist. To hold her two red-lotus-like feet in their heart—spring flowers had blossomed out of the earth, where those feet rested. Yes, this was the Goddess Saraswati! The peals of whose veen made the beauty-thirsty hearts of all artists turn creative! Whose blessings gave life to truth and its establishment in all corners of the earth! In the store-house of whose heart, all the beauty of the world remained ever-abundant! Eternal was her glory! Immutable her gifts! And ever-new her speech!

As Pradumna gazed, the image of the Goddess slowly melted away. The moonlight became once again dim. The breeze dropped.

For a long time Pradumna could not get out of a feeling of stupified enchantment. Was it a dream that he had seen, or was it really true? At last Suradas' voice roused him with a start. He said, "I've still a few things to do, but if you like you can go now. Well, have you seen for yourself that what I said is not untrue?"

Suradas' words gradually became incoherent. In the half-darkness Pradumna saw that his two eyes were burning. When Pradumna left him and started for the monastery, the moon was practically covered with clouds, the little light which it shed was somehow of a pale yellow colour. At the time of an eclipse he had seen the colour of moonlight change like this.

The field was a very big one, it took him quite a long time to get across it. Then he came into the forest which was as large as it was thick. It was a tangle of teak and deodar trees and their branches intertwined and mingled to make it very dark inside the forest. He was walking very fast lest it became dawn before he reached the monastery. Suddenly he saw a patch of light shining in one place; at first he thought that perhaps it was moonlight coming through the trees, but when he looked carefully he realised that the light was unlike that of the moon. He became very curious. He left the road and entered deeper into the forest. When Pradumna came close to the group of pipul trees through which he had seen the light, what he saw through a gap in the tree-trunks made him stop short in surprise. How could this be? He had seen her just now in the middle of the field. This was the same wonderfully beautiful woman. Strange! She was now walking around in the forest! Like a glow-worm her body shed a kind of soothing bright light which lit up the forest to a great distance. When he came nearer, he noticed that her large eyes were half closed. In the spell of some strange intoxication, she seemed to be seeking a way out and failing in her effort, she was circling frenziedly inside the group of pipul trees. She looked terribly distressed.

Pradumna suddenly felt terribly frightened. He felt that from the time of seeing the Goddess Saraswati in the field and up to this, the whole affair was ghostly;

otherwise what was all this inside the forest at this hour of the night?

He did not stand there for another moment. He quickly walked out of the forest and when he reached the garden of the monastery, the dim moon was then setting behind the range of the Kumar hills.

When Pradumna got up in the morning, he went straight to Acharya Purnabardhan and told him all that had happened from the time of his meeting Suradas up till last night. Acharya Purnabardhan was a teacher of Buddhist philosophy. He was the oldest and most learned of the vikshus in the monastery, that was why he was greatly respected by one and all. Hearing the story he was terribly surprised, at the same time his eyes seemed full of apprehension. He asked, "Why didn't you tell me all this before?"

"He had told me not to—I promised him."

"Well, then why have you come to tell me now?"

"Because, I now feel as if I've done harm to someone."

Purnabardhan thought over something, then said, "I knew that something like this would happen. Padma-Shambhav and some of his ignorant tantric disciples have set about to destroy the religious life of this country. There's nothing they won't do for their own selfish ends; and Pradumna, I can see clearly that your disobedience

and overwhelming curiosity will be your downfall! Last night you did a great wrong, you helped to imprison the Goddess Saraswati!"

This time it was Pradumna's turn to be surprised. He could not say a word. Purnabardhan continued, "It's just because I want to keep them out of this kind of bad company, that I don't give permission to any of the students of the monastery to go outside. However, you are young, what's the good of blaming you, but tell me what does this Suradas look like?"

Pradumna described Suradas to him. Purnabardhan said, "I know the man you are calling Suradas, his name is neither Suradas nor is his home in Abanti. He is that famous kapalik (a worshipper of Siva and Kali)—Gunadya. He gave you a false name for his own ends."

Pradumna cried out impatiently, "But you said—"

Purnabardhan replied, "I'm telling you that history. The ruined mound of the Saraswati temple beside the river is a famous place of pilgrimage of the Hindus. Nearly two hundred years ago, a young singer lived there. At that time the temple wasn't very famous, but the legend goes—this singer was such a master of the Megha-Mallar, that on the full moon night in the month of Ashar, enchanted with his singing the Goddess Saraswati herself appeared before him. From that time, the temple became a famous place of pilgrimage. Even after that singer died, any musician who could play or sing the Megha-Mallar well could draw the Goddess to appear

before him on a full moon night. This Gunadya was once present on the occasion when the famous singer of Abanti—Suradas, sang there. He could sing the Megha-Mallar wonderfully indeed. It is said that, pleased with his singing, the Goddess Saraswati appeared before him and told him to ask for a boon. Suradas prayed that he should become the greatest amongst all the great musicians of this country. Saraswati granted him his desire. When the Goddess also told Gunadya to ask for a boon, enchanted with her beauty he prayed to be given the Goddess herself. Saraswati replied that no man without talent or genius could have her. His name might be Gunadya (the talented one) but he possessed not a single talent for any art which could give him the right to ask for her. For that, he would have to strive through many incarnations. When Saraswati disappeared Gunadya's infatuation increased still more, and at the same time, he felt very angry with the Goddess. He tried to find a tantric guru who would teach him such a mantra (mystic formula) by which he could imprison and bind the Goddess. I know he took lessons in tantric practices from a sannyasi. But this sannyasi realised after a while that Gunadya was seeking to learn the tantric cult to serve only a mean desire; and so he drove Gunadya away. All the older people here know of all this. I hadn't heard of Gunadya since then and thought that perhaps he had gone away from this country. But from what you say, I feel that perhaps last night he has been

able to achieve his desire. He must have been learning tantric practices somewhere; all this time. Anyway, you go at once to the temple and find out if he is there and if he is, let me know."

Pradumna did not wait there another moment. He ran out through the monastery garden.

When he reached the temple, he found that what he feared had happened. There was no one there. There was neither Gunadya nor the sannyasi. Only a few earthen pots and some dry wood for the sacred fire were lying about here and there in the temple.

That night Pradumna left the monastery without telling anyone anything.

After leaving the monastery Pradumna had gone only to see Sunanda once to tell her that he was going away on some important work and would come back very soon. A year had passed since then, throughout which he had searched for Gunadya in Kanchi, in North Kosal and all the places of Magadha. But, nowhere could he find any trace of him.

During his travels, however, he had heard of several very curious things. Mihirgupta, the famous sculptor of Magadha, had been ordered by the King to make an image of the Buddha. For one year he had laboured on this image but its face was so ugly and expressionless, that people could not make out whether it was an image

of the Buddha, or of the fierce robber—Damanak!

Jamunacharya, the famous learned philosopher of the Taxila University, had been engaged in making a commentary on the philosophy of Mimangsha, but suddenly he found that he could no longer make out the meaning of its axioms; so he had taken upon himself the task of re-learning the Vedic grammar right from the beginning.

Vikshu Basubrata, the professor of Art in the Mohakotti monastery, had been painting a picture having as its theme the story of the Buddha and Sujata; but after struggling with it for a year, having failed to complete it to his satisfaction, he had given up painting in disgust. It was said that he had now taken to the study of the Sakuna-shastra with great enthusiasm.

One day, Pradumna heard that a vet had recently come to live in a lonely spot near the village of Urubilla. From the description he got of him, he seemed very much like Gunadya. Immediately Pradumna went about asking people in the village about the vet but no one could tell him where he was.

Tired and worn out with wandering around the whole day, he came and sat down under a big banyan-tree, near the village of Urubilla. It was not yet evening. The leaves of the trees were dancing in the soft breeze and in the fields nearby, the heads of ripe corn were glittering like gold. Further beyond stood a small hill from which a waterfall came down, whose waters had formed a pond just below the hill. Many lotuses bloomed

in the pond and wild swans were sporting in its waters. Pradumna's gaze suddenly fell on a woman coming down the steps cut into the hillside, with a pitcher clasped in her arms.

He felt a little suspicious and went forward. When he reached the high bank of the pond he felt giddy. There she was! The same woman whom he had seen in the midst of the field in moonlight; whom he had seen roaming lost in the forest. She wore a dirty saree and nothing was left of that luminosity which had surrounded her body. But it was the same charming face, the same lovely eyes, the same beautiful figure!

Standing there, he had no doubt left in his mind that this was she. He felt completely bewildered. In his excitement he had left the monastery and gone out in search of Gunadya, but he had never thought of what he would do, if he ever found him. So now he practically sneaked away from that place.

Every evening Pradumna came and sat beneath the banyan-tree, and just before dusk, the Goddess came down the hillside; again when dusk fell, she went up step by step with the pitcher in her arms. He sat there and saw her every day.

Some time passed like this. One day Pradumna was sitting quietly under the tree when the Goddess got down into the pond. He too thought of something and went and stood on its bank. Across the pond he saw the Goddess had put down the pitcher and was busy gather-

ing lotuses. There was a big lotus towards the opposite end of the pond where the water was very deep. She tried to get at it for some time, then having failed to do so, she looked up; seeing Pradumna she laughed in a disconcerted manner, then looking towards him she smiled and said, "Will you get that flower for me?"

"I will, if you do one thing."

"What?"

"Will you give me something to eat? I haven't had anything the whole day."

She looked pained and said, "Why didn't you tell me so long? Come over to this side, let the flower be." Pradumna got down into the water and picked the lotus, then went over to the other side. The Goddess said, "You come and sit under that big tree every day, don't you?"

Pradumna gave the flower to her and said, "Yes, I too see you coming every evening to fetch water."

She replied with a smile, "Our hut is on that hill, you come with me, I'll give you something to eat."

Suddenly the Goddess looked all around with a strange, bewildered gaze, then she began climbing the steps cut on the hillside and Pradumna followed her. When they reached the top of the hill, a neat and tidy little hut was seen behind a clump of bamboos. The Goddess opened the door, went inside and called to Pradumna, "Come."

Pradumna saw there was no one else in the hut. He

asked, "Do you live here alone?"

"No, a sannyasi has brought me here. I don't know what he does but he goes away from here occasionally and comes back after five or six days. You sit down here." The Goddess brought an earthen pot full of barley-gruel for him to drink. It tasted like nectar, Pradumna had never tasted such wonderful barley-gruel before. It suddenly occurred to him that if what Acharya Purnabardhan had said was true, and if, what he had seen with his own eyes was not magic, then here was the Goddess Saraswati in front of him. He felt curious to know what she would say about herself. He asked, "Where did you live before you came here. Which part of the country do you come from?"

The Goddess was busy serving out curry and rice in a big wooden plate. Hearing the question, she looked at Pradumna in surprise and said, "You are asking about me? I don't know where my home is. I'm supposed to have been lying unconscious in a ruined temple on a road-side in Bidisa. The sannyasi picked me up and brought me here. Ever since then I've been here, I can't remember where I lived before that."

She was looking out absent-mindedly towards the sun which was setting on the edge of the forest behind the village of Urubilla. She went on gazing and trying to recollect something, but perhaps she could not remember it. Suddenly some thought brought tears to her lotus-petal-like eyes. She quickly wiped them with her sarree,

placed the wooden plate full of rice in front of Pradumna and said, "There's nothing to eat. You stay here to-night, I've dried some lotus seeds; at night I'll make a pudding with those seeds. You can go in the morning."

Pradumna felt like weeping. Oh, self-forgotten Goddess of all the world's beauty! All the wealth in the treasury of the Maharaja of Bidisa and the store-houses of its great traders was not worth even one particle of the dust of your feet! What holiness had that Bidisa's road-side earned, that you should have laid on its dust?

After he finished eating Pradumna asked to take leave. An expression of dismay came to the Goddess' eyes. She said, 'Why don't you stay here tonight? I'll cook a pudding for you.'

Pradumna asked, "Don't you feel afraid to stay here alone at night?"

"I feel terribly afraid. When it's dark something moves about in that jungle of cane. I feel so frightened that I can't open my doors. I can't sleep at night, the whole night I just sit up awake."

Pradumna felt like laughing. He thought, because she was afraid to stay alone at night, the Goddess was tempting him with a pudding! He said, "All right, I'll stay tonight."

The Goddess' face became bright with joy. The whole night he sat outside in front of the hut and the Goddess too sat near him. She said, "Such lovely moonlight! But I'm so afraid to come out—I spend my nights

sitting inside the hut."

Pradumna was absolutely amazed to see the Goddess' behaviour. It might be magic, but it was beyond his imagination that anyone could be so self-forgotten. The night passed in talking over so many things. At dawn he asked leave to depart. The Goddess said, "When the sannyasi returns, do come again one day!"

Unknown to the Goddess from that day every night he sat below the hill, gazing towards the hut and guarding her. His brave young heart rebelled against leaving a timid woman alone in a forest.

One day at noon somebody told Pradumna: "The vet about whom you had been asking for, I've just seen him, he's bathing in the pond by the road." Hearing this he went running to the edge of the pond. He saw it was really Gunadya. He had put his bundle of clothes on the bank and had gone down to bathe in the pond. Pradumna stood there waiting. A little later Gunadya came up after changing his clothes. He became stupified to see Pradumna and said, "You here?"

"Can't you understand why I'm here?"

"It's not because you're here to tell me, but I've been feeling very remorseful for what I've done. Every night I have terrible dreams, I hear unknown ones telling me: the punishment for the thing you have done is eternal hell! It's because of this that I went to my guru

—that sannyasi—over a fortnight ago. From him I had learnt the mantra. It gave me the power to easily subjugate anyone I chose, but not to bring back that person to his or her former state. Also it only gave me the power to enslave someone, but not to draw anyone to me, that's why I had to take you with me. It isn't that I don't know anything about music, but I knew that you were an expert in playing the Megha-Mallar. Your music would bring the Goddess there, and once she came, I could bind her with this mantra. But before it happened, I didn't quite believe that such a thing could really be possible. I did it more out of curiosity to test the mantra."

After a pause, Gunadya continued: "Now, I've just come from my guru. Hearing everything, he taught me another mantra which has the power to oppose the other. When water made holy by this mantra is sprinkled on the Goddess she'll become free, but it can't be done."

"Why not?"

"Whoever sprinkles that water will turn into stone for ever. Since for me it's a case of choosing between the frying pan and the fire, I may as well keep her a prisoner. Don't be angry Pradumna, think, perhaps there's a life after death, but what's there after one turns into stone? I shan't be able to do it!"

Pradumna remembered the helpless look in the eyes of the self-forgotten, enslaved Goddess. If this was not done, she would always have to remain in bondage.

Through the ages the inspiration for noble self-

sacrifice which had always first reached the pure hearts of the young—a wave of such inspiration now reached Pradumna's heart. He thought, what was one life? He could sacrifice his life a hundred times, just to get out a thorn which pricked her red feet! Suddenly he turned to Gunadya and said, "Come, I'll go with you. You give me that holy water."

Gunadya looked towards Pradumna in surprise and said, "Think it over well. It's not child's play—"

Pradumna replied, "Come, let us go."

When they came near the hut, Gunadya said, "Pradumna, do think it over well once again. Don't be deluded with false hopes. No one has the power to save you from this—not even the Goddess. Through the power of the mantra, you will become inanimate for ever. Realise it properly. The mantra is holy, infallible, it will not spare anyone!"

"Do you think that I care for anything? Not a bit, let us go."

When they arrived at the hut, the sun was about to set. The Goddess was sitting on the grass in front of the hut, silent and absent-minded. She became very pleased when she saw Pradumna. Smiling, she said, "Come, come, I think of you very often. I felt very sad that I couldn't give you anything to eat the other day. Now, do stay here for some time." Then she went inside the

hut, eager to give them both food.

Pradumna said, "Now give me that holy water."

Gunadya asked, "Then, are you really ready for its consequences?"

Pradumna replied, "Don't say anything more to me, give me the water."

The Goddess set out their places inside the room and gave them both food. When they finished their meal it was nearly dusk. The shadows had descended on the jungle of canes; the red disc of the setting sun was once again hanging over the village of Urubilla. In the twilight the Goddess' lotus-face bloomed in wondrous beauty. She went down to fetch water from the pond, with the pitcher in her arms, as she did every evening.

Gunadya said, "Let me first go away from here, then sprinkle this pot full of water on the Goddess." His eyes filled with tears, and in a spell of great emotion he embraced Pradumna and said, "I'm a coward, I haven't the courage, otherwise—"

He went into the hut and got his things together. He then went down the narrow path by the side of the jungle of canes to the other side of the hill. A short distance away, the King's highway from Magadha to Bidisa lay just below that side of the hill.

Pradumna looked around and began thinking. Twenty years ago, he had come to his mother's lap beneath that blue sky. That mother of his! Sitting in the window of their home in Benares and gazing at the evening sky,

she was probably thinking of her son now. His heart cried out with a desire to see his mother's face, just once, for the last time. Why was the moon so bright on the eastern sky? Above the avenue of trees along the highway to Magadha, a star rose. The shoots in the jungle of canes could no longer be seen clearly in the mellow darkness of dusk.

Pradumna's eyes suddenly filled with tears. At the same moment he saw the Goddess returning with the water, climbing up the hillside. He had put down the pot of holy water on the ground beside him, seeing her he picked it up in his hands. She now came in front of the hut. She held a number of half-bloomed lotus buds in her hands. She asked, "Pradumna, where is the sannyasi?"

Pradumna replied, "He has gone away somewhere again. He is not coming back today."

He then went and touched the Goddess' feet, bowed down in homage to her and said, "Mother, I had done you a great wrong without knowing. Today I have to take the punishment for it, but I take it without any regrets. Till the time I lose my consciousness, to that moment I'll be happy, thinking that I've been given the right to release from her bondage—the Goddess of all beauty in the world."

The Goddess gazed at Pradumna in surprise. Pradumna said again, "Listen, try and think well, where do you come from?"

“ Why, I came from the road-side temple of Bidisa— ”

Pradumna took a handful of water and sprinkled it all over her. The Goddess started as if she had been suddenly waked from sleep.

With unshaken hands, Pradumna took another handful of water and sprinkled it all over the Goddess. For a moment, a wonderful, serene and ethereal beauty was wafted on the breeze before his eyes. His entire body and mind shivered with joy . . . at the same moment he remembered . . . in their home in Benares, his mother was gazing through the window at the evening sky.

A very young girl took initiation from Acharya Shilabrata in the monastery of Kumar-Sreyni. Her name was Sunanda. She was the daughter of Samantadas—the rich merchant of Hiranya-nagar. In spite of a lot of persuasion from her parents, the girl had not agreed to marry. She was greatly respected by everyone in the monastery, because she had taken the vow of celibacy and retirement at a very tender age, but she never mixed much with anyone there. She kept herself busy with work, but always seemed absent-minded.

On moonlit nights, she would stand alone on the stone ramparts of the monastery and brood over something. At dead of night, if she saw anyone coming through the moonlit fields towards the monastery she would gaze fixedly towards him, as if perhaps he might be her be-

loved who had gone away long ago saying that he would return. It seemed she waited wearily counting the days and watching the path by which he might return. Or else, whom did she await so eagerly every morning? And when the morning passed she thought perhaps he would come in the afternoon; when the afternoon passed, maybe, she hoped for his return in the evening.

Day after day, month after month, many such mornings and evenings passed—no one came. Still the girl awaited his return, perhaps he would come tomorrow. She was startled at the sound of a falling leaf and looked out, had he come at last?

On some nights she had a strange dream which repeated itself again and again. In her dream she saw a half-broken stone image hidden in a deep jungle of canes on the top of some hill. At dead of night, the cane bushes on the hill swung in the breeze; a hissing sound came from the clumps of bamboo; and the shadow of the tall cane shoots covered up the stone image. At midnight, on that dark lonely hill-top, as the stormy wind rushed in through the bamboos, incessantly it crooned the Megha-Mallar!

When she woke up at dawn, she felt surprised at her dream of the previous night. Where was that hill? That jungle of canes? Whose—that broken image? And why, this meaningless nightmare?



JYOTIRMOYEE DEVI



RAJ-JOTAK
OR
The Perfect Match

THE AFFAIR WAS REALLY NOTHING, ONLY A GLASS TUBE FULL of curd-germs from Bulgaria, and it had been placed on the shelf in the store-room; and had been brought for Dr. Asit Chatterjee's only son, whom doctors called rickety; mothers — as a spoiled, sickly, mother's ninny; and the matrons in the neighbourhood dubbed as a marasmus-ridden child.

Why a doctor's child should be like that—the people in the doctor's home wondered over this; the neighbours also wondered, as well as spoke about it.

The boy was nearly three years old. Out of the twelve months in a year, for thirty-six weeks he had either fever or cold, or dyspepsia, or fits of howling without any reason—he suffered from one or the other of these. In reality within the last two and a half years, no one had been able to see him apart from his illness. If any day he was well, no one dared to say it out, for fear of such things as the evil eye, jealous planetary influences, etc. He was not only sickly, but also without the liveliness or joyousness natural in a child.

The poor father worried a lot, but his being a doctor was not of much use except in bringing medicines from the dispensary. He himself could not understand for what unknown reason all his medical knowledge was completely defeated; with the result that occasionally he too felt ready to believe in supernatural influences, the evil eye and amulets to ward these off. This time the son's mother said, "Can a disease be cured by the random

treatment given by a doctor in one's own home? My mother's aunt used to say that unless one pays the doctor, an illness can't be cured." She was not really as archaic as one would think from the way she spoke—she was only nineteen.

The doctor's doctor-friend came. He came and was absolutely amazed, was surprised and got angry. He said: had you been sleeping so long with your nose well-oiled? How can the son of a doctor-father be so bat-like in appearance? He said quite a lot more, which was more than enough, but what he left unsaid was not a little.

The treatment was all written out. Phials and phials of medicines, bottles and bottles of patent foods, cod-liver oil to massage his body, and with all this came the Bulgarian curd-germs—actually what we call in plain language 'dambal'—the spoonful of curd which was kept to set a fresh lot of milk into curd.

Then, for some time, the fame of Bulgarian curd-germs had spread all over the country. On pages of magazines, in the voice of every doctor, in the injunctions of dietitians (this was before the era of alphabetically enumerated vitamins), it was so well publicised and its renown spread so much that it had caught the attention of every person whether sick or healthy.

So long there had been no trouble. Like a North-Indian mother in story-books, Anuprova was feeling quite proud that her son was a permanent invalid, her home a hospital and that a great deal of money was being spent

on his treatment. The trouble descended all of a sudden. The night before, the cook had taken some germs out of the tube and put it in milk to set it into curd, according to the instructions given by Anu's mother-in-law. In the morning the curd had also set well.

Early in the morning the son was to take a cup of Horlicks; then butter-milk prepared from that curd; then a special kind of fish stew with soft-boiled rice; then whey prepared from milk with that curd, and so on.

Anu got up from her daily worship. Her eyes fell on the bowl of curd on the shelf. It had set well, Anu's face was serene. Then her eyes travelled to the test-tube full of curd-germs. The name of the germ and the name and address of the manufacturer were written in tiny letters on it. Anu knew enough English to read and write names and addresses on letters, etc. Suddenly she seemed to ponder over something. She stood there benumbed for some time, then she began taking down all the things from the shelf.

In the front verandah the grandmother was waiting for the butter-milk to be ready, with the child in her lap clad in warm socks and shoes on his feet, flannel clothes on his body and a woollen cap on his head, to ward off the damp chill of October; a sweet sad-faced child, feeble as the flickering flame of a storm-swept lamp.

Seeing her daughter-in-law busy with housework instead of preparing the butter-milk, she asked, "What's the matter Bowma (bride-mother)? Have rats carried up

something to the shelf?"

The daughter-in-law replied, "No, mother, Bulgarian dambal."

"What's wrong with that?" asked the mother-in-law in surprise.

"Of all the foreign impurities in creation, and the cook puts it right on the shelf!"

The mother-in-law kept silent. One could not but admit that the reasoning was logical. But again, somehow it seemed new. But it was no use arguing, how can one fall short in one's devotion to ritualism before one's daughter-in-law?

Asit came down from upstairs dressed and ready to go out. Seeing his mother and son standing in front of the hall, he came forward. Smiling a little he tapped his son's cheeks gently and asked, "Have you had something to eat?"

Even if he could not walk the boy could talk well, he said, "Mother is having the room washed."

Asit looked towards the store-room in surprise and asked, "Why? What's the necessity of having the room washed before giving him something to eat?" He looked towards his mother. She kept silent. He asked again, "Has the curd set properly?"

Mother replied, "Yes."

"Have you given it to him?"

Mother said, "What foreign 'dambal' you've brought, everything has become tainted with impurity."

“What does it mean?” The doctor asked in amazement. The mother gave no reply. Inside the room, quite unconcerned—the daughter-in-law was having things cleaned and washed. Now the doctor looked at his mother and said, “Do you get letters from Pishima (father’s sister)?”

Mother said, “Why?”

“Why don’t you write and ask her to come once. She’ll be pleased if she comes. Should I alone see Khoka’s bat-like appearance? Give it to me, give me the curd, I’ll prepare the butter-milk!”

The servant came and announced, “Satish Babu has come and is waiting outside.”

Anu’s washing and wiping was nearly over. Their eating of fish and meat, of unclean food and breaking of traditional customs and Anu’s respect for gods and goddesses, brahmins and widows, rituals and traditions—Anu breathed a sigh of relief. Just think, supposing someone had bathed the family deity with panchamrita (a mixture of milk, curd, ghee, honey and sugar) prepared with that curd! Anu decided in her mind it was because of all this that the gods in this land were no longer kind, and that was the reason why Khoka was always ailing.

What happened before was this—

Anu’s marriage had taken place in keeping with all the laws of caste, tradition and Shastric codes. The bride

was of the same colour of caste, the colour of her skin fair, and from her father's side there had been no lack in the addition of the shining colour of silver rupees.

Before the marriage Asit's pishima and jethima (father's elder brother's wife) had seen her when they had gone to some feast. Pishima said, "A really beautiful girl—and so tiny, and I can't say how much money her father has piled up. Like our Asit who is coming up as a doctor, he is also a very great doctor—a specialist in something. Who amongst the people of Calcutta hasn't heard the name of Paresh Chakravarti! Why don't you see the girl once? The girl's mother and pishima got at me and were so insistent!"

It was needless to say that all this was being addressed to Asit's mother. She said, "But you are saying the girl is tiny. Will she match with Asit? Besides, is she properly educated, does she know much? Will Asit care for her?"

The sister-in-law frowned and said, "Did you have any education? Were you a highly educated person worthy of my learned brother? If Asit's father could have lived with you for ever, his son will also be able to do the same with an uneducated girl."

The mother had not been able to give any reply to this reasoning and kept silent.

—People of former times carried on the profession of their fathers; people of this age think whether they can inherit their father-in-law's profession. However, consi-

dering everything, with the approval and consent of his pishima, jethima, thakurma (father's mother), father and mother, the arrangements for Asit's marriage began.

One day his mashima (mother's sister) came visiting and said, "Didi (elder sister) I hear it's a raj-jotak union; your mother-in-law consulted astrologers; they say that such a perfect combination of stars in any couple only occurred in the case of Rama and Sital"

So according to the canons of astrology it was a raj-jotak union—the most perfect of combinations for a most wonderfully harmonised married life. And in due course the marriage of Asit and Anuprova was celebrated.

Watered by the tides of married life, the little bride grew day by day like the crescent moon or the banana shoot in the rainy season.

Then she came to live in her father-in-law's home. She did all the housework perfectly and she preserved purity in all things scrupulously. There was no end to her fame.

Then in due course thakurma went to heaven. Pishima gave Anu a first-class certificate and went to end her days in a place of pilgrimage. Mashima never even got the chance to come and see the raj-jotak pair. Asit's father too died.

In the home there only remained Asit's mother and her children, also Anu and that son of hers—and Anu and her purity-mania.

When Asit thought of Anu, he could not think of her separately from ritualism, and to think of ritual and purity (of course Asit knew nothing of the principles of ritual) he felt they had no existence apart from Anu. This was the reference to Anu and her son in connection with pishima.

Because Satish arrived in the middle of it, Asit had to swallow his anger and go outside with a smiling face. He pulled a chair and said cheerfully, "Won't you sit down? Have some tea?"

Satish replied, "No, I won't sit down. My little girl has had continuous fever since the last seven days. Will you see her once?"

The doctor's car was ready, he went to see Satish's daughter first. The girl was about ten years old, she had fever, but she did not seem sickly and was not at all overcome by her illness.

The girl's mother was sitting next to her and she greeted him rather shyly.

The medicines were arranged on a small teapoy; the prescriptions laid out on a table; a jar of water and a glass on a small stool; a basin under the bed; a couple of chairs, an easy chair and a folded up camp-bed in one corner—this was all that the room contained.

The examination of the patient was over. It suddenly

struck the doctor that the patient's health seemed quite good. The disease had not been able to make any impression on it so far. Immediately, his sickly son came to his mind; after which it occurred to him that these people's room was very clean and neat. No, there were no expensive furniture or pictures, everything was plain and simple. But they seemed to have good taste; besides, he felt as if they were very happy. Of course, he had no real evidence of their happiness or unhappiness, but still—

The doctor wrote out the medicines; ordered the patient's diet; caressed the girl stroking her head; talked with his friend; and gave hope and courage about the illness to his friend's wife, though in a slightly uneasy manner.

When he got up to go, he looked at his watch, it was thirty-seven past nine. It was nearly two hours. He had an appointment with Dr. Mitra to go with him to see a patient exactly at ten. The doctor did not wait any longer. He said, "Give me her news in the evening."

But he arrived in the evening before getting any news. Then while coming every morning and evening, the disease turned out to be typhoid and the patient's condition became serious; then the days flowed into the end of the second week; and the mother's sad frightened gaze by seeking absolute reliance in him made him a part of this family; he did not even know when.

He felt a tenderness for the girl, compassion for his

friend, and for his friend's wife a feeling was born in his mind which could be called respect, a sort of pity mixed with deference or a polite fascination. Feeling more than the responsibility of a doctor's duty, in reality he became obsessed with a craving for getting their companionship. To say it plainly, he liked them very much, and the auspicious moment when his liking for them was born arrived at just the time when a great distaste for his home had also been born in his mind. With the result that everything in his friend's home felt very novel to him. The question of a comparison with Anu rose again and again in his mind.

The second week ends.

As the hours of the first night of the third week increase, the more Renu's mother's frightened eyes turn towards him in anguish. She fiddles with this and that, and does not move out of the room.

The doctor feels the patient's pulse, counts the rise and fall of her breath and notes every little change in her condition. As he is going to get up, suddenly Niru says, "Why doesn't Asit Babu stay tonight?" She turns to her husband and asks, "Supposing her condition becomes bad like it did last night?"

Satish looks eagerly towards his friend.

As a doctor, Asit is used to offering false words of hope to the patient's near and dear ones, with a smile on

his face. He looks at Niru's face and is going to say in the same manner, "No, what's there to be frightened about? If there's any trouble I'll come the moment you call me." But before he can say anything Niru says, "Let me order your dinner here, yes? Why not stay? Your driver will take a message to your home."

Satish says, "I'll probably have to call you up again like last night. It would be much better if you stayed. Will it inconvenience you very much?"

Asit says, "All right. But don't make any arrangement for dinner, I'll come back at about eleven. But I feel there won't be any need for me tonight."

Niru's sad, pleading eyes gaze at him. Asit laughs. "What a timid person you are! All right, I'll come." By that time the mother's eyes become bright again.

The movement of traffic on the street gradually dies down and the neighbourhood becomes quiet. A peace that is half of sleep and half of awaking now rules on the street. Satish and Niru wait eagerly for the doctor.

Asit returns from his dispensary. He has his food, and as usual goes to his bedroom and feels his son's body to see if he has any temperature; he looks up his next day's work, his cases, in his diary and jots down a few notes.

The south window is closed, on the bed underneath the mosquito-net his son sleeps, his wife has not yet come after finishing her meal. He glances once towards his bed.

His bed has no attraction for him, not even the attraction which a tired man feels for his bed.

He goes to his mother's room and says, "I'm going now, mother, to see a patient. Perhaps I shan't be able to return tonight."

There is no necessity of waiting for an answer. He rushes down the stair, then out through the front door, he dashes away driving the car himself.

In the patient's house, the girl's father sits awake in an easy chair, smoking a cigarette and yawning every now and then. It is a quarter past eleven on the clock. The mother lies on the camp-bed next to her daughter; resting her head beside her daughter's, holding one hand of the child in her own, she has gone to sleep.

The doctor comes, and after inspecting the patient's chart, he sits down near his friend. "She seems better. But one never knows, since I've come I'd better stay."

The night grows older. The father yawns and looks at the clock. In the end he says, "Shall I wake Niru?"

"No, no, both of you sleep. Let her sleep, she's very tired. I'm here."

The father too sleeps—but in the easy chair. The doctor reads off and on, and occasionally gets up to have a look at his patient.

Niru opens her eyes once, seeing the doctor she smiles in a reassured manner and then goes to sleep again.

But nights fraught with danger and the sorrows of the afflicted, do they come singly or for once only? On some days towards dawn the temperature goes down to 96° and the body turns icy, on other days it rises to 105° and overwhelms the patient. The parents too become overwhelmed with fear and the mother becomes as numb as her daughter.

The doctor is intent on getting an injection ready. He wipes this and that with iodine.

He seems to be taking ages, Niru thinks, how ice-cold Renu is becoming. The sound which comes out from her voice in calling her husband is more horrible than a wail. The doctor looks round with a start, then after feeling the patient's pulse he scolds, "Hush, what are you doing?" But he feels a great pity, he cannot go home. In this way the third week—the critical third week—passes and the illness takes a turn for the better. The fourth week is also passing. But the doctor's night duty does not end. Supposing? Can anyone guarantee anything about what might happen?

Towards the end of the fourth week one night Satish says, "You had better go home tonight. You are worn out without sleep for so many days. If the need arises—but I don't think there will be any need. What do you say?"

The doctor smiles a little and sips his cup of tea. Niru says; "It's wrong to trouble you any more. An utterly selfish thing to do!"

Asit thinks, "Oh, how unselfish they've suddenly become today!" With a short laugh he gets up to go.

As usual his bed in his room is kept ready with the bed-clothes turned down. He may stay out or may return.

Asit enters the room. According to routine and habit (though for the last few days the routine has not been scrupulously maintained) he lifts the mosquito-net and feels his son to see if he is sweating or not. No, he has no fever. December, but how horribly hot the room is! All the windows are tightly shut. Anu is sleeping soundly beside her son. Asit opens the window at the head of the bed. He is tired of telling Anu how bad it is to sleep with all the windows closed like this. But what is the use? Who knows what may happen to Khoka just now and then he will have to suffer all the botheration of it day after day. But Anu is sleeping quite well in the stuffy heat of this closed-up room. It seems surprising to him how similar they are when it is a question of sleeping. Niru too sleeps like that. If Satish or she sit up she keeps entirely awake, but when she sleeps she cannot even think of herself, leave alone her child. Let that go. But even lying in his own bed and in his own room, he can neither sleep nor feel any sense of comfort. It seems as if he slept ~~better~~ there. How many days did he stay there? But how strange, that a new habit can make one feel unused to an old one!

Asit cannot sleep. He looks out through the open window near his head and gazes at the sky. The limitless luminous calligraphy on the sky and the eternal shadow-writing on his mind become fused. He seems to realise to a certain extent what his mind thinks and wants to say. But—but what need is there for that?

He lies in his bed like a stranger in a most stupified stiff manner. It comes to his mind that he does not know that sleeping woman—Anu. He does not know any of them. He is not an ascetic. Nor is he like that Siddhartha (Buddha) who renounced the sleeping Jasodhara. But his whole mind feels numb. That sickly child? Yes, his. But he feels no tenderness for him, only a feeling of disinterested kindness.

He does not like this strange attitude of his mind, but surprisingly enough he does not dislike it either. His mind is being churned with a wonderful, surprise-stricken, but conscious sorrow. He realises suddenly after all this time, that he never wanted Anu or got her, and he has no fascination or tender feeling for her in his mind. He glances at Anu, she is sleeping peacefully. The child moves restlessly and coughs a little.

Asit feels startled. He gets up and puts on the light. It is December, one cannot tell, Khoka may catch a chill. The clock strikes three. Asit cannot remember if he has been awake all this time or he has slept even a little. But he should not keep awake any longer. He closes the window, picks up a durrie, a pillow and a

coverlet, and comes out into the verandah. He ought to sleep now, even from the medical point of view.

The sky which can be seen from the verandah, even if there is no field or forest beneath it—only the crowded pomp of Calcutta houses—that sky is still vast. A number of stars stare down at him. But the chilly winter breeze has a cruel sleep-bringing touch and it does not take long for Asit to go to sleep.

As usual Asit goes out in the morning. He must go to Satish's place to see how Renu has passed the night. Quite well, of course, but still he has a duty to her.

Satish's tea and food is arranged on the table. Niru asks if he will have some tea. The doctor sits down. Satish and the doctor talk, Niru listens. The doctor thinks that somehow Niru knows everything, she understands everything too. The gleam of pure intelligence that shines in her face, her brow, her eyes—where, he has never noticed anything like that on other people's faces? Who could these other people be? Then? . . . Let her go.

The doctor looks at her for a little while in silence. There seems to be no limit to his regard and admiration for Niru.

Niru knows. Niru understands his feeling of admiration. She feels a little disconcerted, but she brightens up perceptibly. Satish too knows, he understands and looks at it mockingly, but still he seems to feel a little jealous too. "Isn't it time for you to do your rounds?" asks Satish.

The doctor replies, "Yes, I'll get up now. I came to have a look at Renu, she still needs looking after."

Niru asks, "Is there anything to be afraid of, still?"

The doctor replies pleasantly, "No, there's nothing much to be afraid of. But if anything serious does arise we are there."

The mother says, "Again! Let us not need you again ever!"

The doctor becomes completely abashed. He thinks, these people—the nearest relatives of a patient—how ungrateful they are! I have taken so much trouble for so many days to save their child, and if the need arises I will come again; still—she might have put it differently.

Satish asks, "What do you say, how would it be if we went for a change? Perhaps the novelty would help the girl to pick up quickly, wouldn't it?"

Somehow this question hurts the doctor. But he pulls himself up and says, "Where are you thinking of going?"

"Why don't you suggest it?"

But before Asit can say anything the girl and her mother both propose going to the mother's paternal home—Patna. Niru asks, "At this time of the year Patna is nice—isn't it?"

Satish looks up questioningly. Within a few minutes the date and all other arrangements about going are decided upon. They will go in about a week's time, by that time Renu will probably be able to take a little rice.

Satish's face looks pleased, Niru's also; but the doctor's face becomes very grave. He gives directions about medicine and diet, and gets up to go. Niru says, "Come again in the evening."

The day of their departure came. Asit went to the Howrah station to see them off. He had the patient's bedding laid out; he made arrangements for their immediate comfort as well as for the night; chalked out the routine for the patient's diet and medicine. He fixed everything.

Satish sat down and opened his case and offered Asit a cigarette. The doctor sat on Renu's berth. There was only a little more time left before the train would leave. Satish smoked in silence. Full of joy, Renu talked away incessantly. Her mother looked towards the platform in a disconcerted manner.

"Look mother, there's a pea-nut-seller. When can I have pea-nuts Doctor Babu? Please mother, can I have just one today? Father please?"

Mother said, "No, what nonsense!" The father gave no reply. The doctor only smiled.

The whistle blew, the doctor got down. Satish too got down on the platform, held the doctor's hand and shook it affectionately. Then still holding his friend's hand he stepped back into the compartment. Before the train left, suddenly, the feeling of hostility towards his friend

which was born in his mind because of Niru's feeling of gratitude, vanished completely.

The train began moving. Freed from jealousy and trouble, one friend smiled sincerely at the other and bade farewell touching the head with folded hands. Niru too did the same. She remarked, "He's awfully good and very polite, isn't he?"

Satish was probably reading the newspaper and gave no reply.

Renu had been ill for thirty-five days before their departure and three days had passed since they had gone. Continuity had once again returned to Asit's old routine. Khoka, Anu, Mother—their mania for purity; servant; cook; house-work and all its accompaniment of fuss—they were quite happy with all that. The household was running in the same old way—only he had not been aware of it all, for a few days. That is why the movements of its wheel seemed a little new to him.

Khoka smiled with his same sickly face in his grandmother's arms. To Anu her husband was a matter of little account. She went on just as usual with her household duties, her rituals, her maintenance of purity. She had no time to think of the husband who had been there before, and had not existed for some time in between. She was that kind of a wife, who was devoted when one was near and when one was far away she remained

the mistress of the household, given up to serving it. Her rôle was never that of a beloved woman stricken with the sorrow of parting from her lover.

A letter came. They had given news of their arrival. Renu had kept well, Renu was keeping well. Everyone was well, they were liking the change very much, etc. What was there to be surprised about in this. One had known that they would like it! But it seemed terribly necessary for him to know it. And Renu was well, good, it was good news. But this was not a letter which needed an answer. What need was there to keep it? But let it be. The letter was laid aside. However, he felt his friend and his wife to be somehow ungrateful. One part of his mind protested against this, but still the thought came to his mind.

Asit got up, he had to go out.

It is cold and late in the night. Sitting near the table Asit is reading a new book, and feels quite chilly.

After a long time, he gets up according to his old routine to take his son's temperature. No, he has no fever. His looks too seem to have improved. Anu is sleeping just as usual with one hand resting on her son. He remembers Niru.

•Strange, today he does not feel just kind towards his son. His mind is flooded with affection and tenderness. He looks at Anu. He remembers her ritualism and her

traditionalism, and the son's ill-health. He recollects that after the irritating episode of the curd-germs he has not spoken with her much. But surprisingly enough, he has not thought of it; rather it seems natural for things to be like that. But, is he as indifferent as an outsider, or did heated words pass between them over it? No, he cannot remember anything like that having happened. Anu's slight form is tilted towards her son. Now her eyes are closed, that is why her face looks as soft and tender as her years, she looks a child. When awake, Anu, in her ways and her speech, seems to be an expensive pocket edition of pishima in the household. Asit feels like laughing, thinking of her ways. Anu is beautiful, when she sleeps one wants to gaze at her for a while. But at other times? Surprising, but even remembering her as she is then, Asit feels a tenderness for her today.

The covering has slipped off Anu, she is lying curled up; probably she is feeling cold. He puts out the light, then getting into his own bed by her side, he pulls up the bed-clothes and covers up Anu. As he is putting it right, feeling a pull on her quilt Anu asks, "Yes?"

Asit says, "Nothing."

He pulls the quilt and covers her up to the neck. Anu pulls it still higher and moves to the next bed and draws close to him. In a drowsy voice she says, "It's very cold."

Asit says, "Yes, the quilt had slipped off." Anu comes still closer, her warm breath blows on Asit's chest.

The light from the street lamp comes through a half-open corner window and diminishes the darkness in the room.

He gazes at that path of light with sleepless eyes. The only sound in the room is that of the peaceful breathing of the two sleeping ones. Asit looks absent-mindedly towards his son's bed. Absolutely close to him lay his son's mother. Suddenly a strange unknown sorrow makes Asit feel wistful. Even in the completeness of his getting her, he does not know her; perhaps she too does not know him. They are absolute strangers to each other, though his bond with her is entirely inter-related, specific, even unbreakable. Strangely enough, that unknown woman, that stranger, is so completely assured, so satisfied, in her complete dependence on him.

His mind is filled with a deep compassion. He places his hand on Anu's back. Anu says again drowsily, "When did you come?"

As if every day has passed as usual, there has been no gap, no pause or no lack anywhere! She knows nothing of her husband's absence, she does not even seem to realise that he has been absent from her little world. In pitiful tenderness Asit tells her, "Go to sleep."

Tonight he feels no indifference for her, no distaste for her, he does not even remember the contrariness of her ritualism.

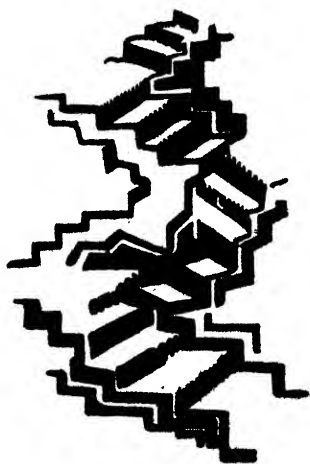
His mind is just full of kindness. Among the overflowing waves of the sea of tenderness in his mind, nothing,

no one can be seen clearly—neither Anu, nor Niru. For some unknown reason Asit's secret, sub-conscious mind is saying again and again, "Poor thing!" As if he came to know today, that this Anu is not his beloved, not his sweetheart, she is only an object of his kindness; and slowly his pity enlarges itself and swallows up all the infatuation, love, desire and affection in his mind.

Lying with her head in the crook of his arm Anu is sleeping, free from all worry, and in complete peace.

Detached and indifferent, Asit lies thinking of many things in heaven and earth. The regard which knows no limit; the love which knows no defeat; the infatuation which brooks no resistance; tonight he realises that his mind has no room for any such emotion.

MANIK BANERJEE



S I R E E
OR
The Stair

FROM THE OTHER END OF THE FIRST STOREY, THE STAIR reaches the open terrace of the roof after passing beyond the mediation of the second storey and the third. To get to the roof-terrace by climbing these stairs one has, in ordinary course, to oppose the law of gravitation sixty-four times with the strength of only one foot. But ordinary rules do not apply to everyone. There are such people in this world, who when going upstairs, just leap across two or three steps at a time. But these people, even though they are mortals, are not just men, but supermen. They are all supermen for this reason: that there are no super-women. Because no woman ever climbs up a stair leaping across two or three steps. They have not the ability to do this; also there are hindrances.

In this building, over the roof which covers this stair with its sixty-four steps, there is a thin-walled, tin-roofed little room known commonly as 'Cheel-Kuthi' or the Kite's Nest. To get up on the foundation-plinth of this building, and to get down from the ground-floor verandah to the courtyard, only one step has been provided; but to get up into, and come down from, the cheel-kuthi, there are two steps, so this also is a stair. When the aggregate of two ones are two, and all aggregates of steps are stairs, one cannot but give the cheel-kuthi its glory of possessing a stair.

The shadow of the building keeps the sixty-four-stepped stair cool, but the stair of the cheel-kuthi only gets its shade late in the afternoon; and even in summer not

until the sun becomes mellow. Leaving out cloudy days, even two months after winter, at midday, the cheel kuthi turns into a heaven for chilly people, and its stair turns into a furnace. It burns the soles of even that person's feet—who feels cold in all seasons, be it summer or winter.

Ity's left foot is nearly an inch shorter in length than her right one. She quickly moves away her shorter foot immediately after placing it on the first step. She makes a loud hissing sound through a gap in her teeth to make Manab realise what the matter is.

Manab asks, "Is it hot?"

Ity replies, "It's become burning hot."

There was water in the earthen pitcher in the room—water which Manab had carted up himself from the ground-floor.

Manab tilts the pitcher and pours out the water on the stair. As long as he keeps pouring the water, Ity does not say a word, she keeps quiet just to see if he pours out all of it. When the pitcher becomes empty, she catches hold of Manab's hand, presses it, and says, "You poured all the water? I'd have had some, I'm thirsty."

"Why didn't you have it so long?"

"Did I remember about it till now? I realised that I'm thirsty when I saw the water."

Manab smiles a little. There is a seven days' growth of beard on that forty-year-old face; the left cheek had

been cut open and then stitched at some time or other; with continuous wiping of perspiration his forehead is shining like polished brass; his two lips are blackened with tobacco smoke; and the sign of excessive betel-chewing is stamped on his teeth and mouth. That is why his sweet, gentle smile seems so wonderful. A shy smile spreads on Ity's face also, and two big crater-like dimples form on her pimple-pitted cheeks. Manab says, "Let's go down. You'll drink some water and I'll go and fill the pitcher."

Ity says, "Aren't you thirsty?"

Manab replies, "Yes, yes, I'll get thirsty enough, why worry?"

The water from the pitcher after flooding the two steps had got divided into three streams; then becoming one again near the drain, the water had begun pouring down it now. The entire terrace of the roof was covered with dried-up mould which would become loose and come off after getting the heat of a few more days of noon-tide sunshine; and then be crushed into powder when Manab paced on the roof in the evenings. Perhaps the picture of his evening stroll on the roof rose in Manab's mind the moment he had stepped down, pitcher in hand, on the first step.

He turns his face and asks, "Will you come once in the evening?"

"Will you be angry if I don't?"

"Angry? Can I be angry with you? From now on

I'll feel hurt and sulk."

"Then I won't come."

Quite pleased, Manab says, "That's good. Today I'll count the stars all by myself and sulk; tomorrow, you'll come and coax me. I feel like being so childish, Ity! I can't tell you how I'm feeling!"

"I too."

It is quite certain that Manab has acquired a greater depth of understanding; at any rate his mind has become more tranquil. When both of them descended to the roof-terrace he suddenly asks very anxiously, "You're not feeling sorry, are you Ity?"

"No, sir, no. What's there to be sorry about?"

The plan is this, that Ity will not come in the evening, so as to give him an opportunity to feel hurt and sulk. But somehow, already he begins feeling hurt, he makes his face grave and says, "I'm much older than you, that's why I'm asking."

"But what am I—a fairy dropped from the sky?"

His hurt feeling becomes deeper, it seems that even Manab's eyes are getting tearful. "If you had been a fairy from the sky, you wouldn't have looked at me, would you?"

"What a child you are!"

The sky was full of sunshine and the roof-terrace warm. Manab's face became smiling again; with his head resting on Ity's shoulders he was going to say something, but it was best not to do so. Ity had, how-

ever, to do something more difficult than speaking; she had to answer his smile with a smile. Was it not surprising that they could both stand for a few moments in the pose of having forgotten all about going downstairs? Everything else besides the little patch of roof below their feet, it seemed, had become completely unnecessary. This roof was very high up, perhaps it was not as high as the height an expensive rocket could reach after leaving the earth; but who was going to shoot an expensive rocket to prove the relativity of heights? The other houses in the neighbourhood were not so high, only they were better looking because their bricks did not gape out of the plaster, as they did in this building. But even that was preferred by people who stood on the roof for they had only to open their eyes to see the building as a whole. Besides, standing here one acquired an extra capacity for becoming overwhelmed and losing all consciousness of one's self.

"Ugh!"

Manab now comes to himself, he asks, "Is it hot?"

"It's become like fire."

Manab says remorsefully, "Today, I'm only making you suffer."

"Of course you are. By saying that you are."

The moment they reach the sixty-four-stepped stair they look at each other's face as if in surprise. Manab says,

“ But the stair is very cool.”

Ity says to comfort him, “ It’s because you came from the heat. But I didn’t realise so long how hot your room was.”

Slowly Ity comes down with lazy, unwilling, footsteps, as if she wants to let go at every moment. Because some light enters into the entrance of the stair the shade here is less chilly, less dim. With every step that one comes down one seems to feel that the shade is deepening, its chill increasing. But at this hot season there can be no shade so chill which gives one anything more than a slight feeling of comfort. Ity, however, shivers violently once, just as a fever-patient on whose body someone suddenly places a lump of ice.

On the verandah of the third storey a girl was standing with a one-year-old child in her arms. The baby boy was sucking a rubber dummy and the girl was sucking about three of the baby’s fingers.

The step on the middle curve of the stair is comparatively wider, Ity stands there and tries to control her shivering, then she makes an attempt to turn back, but she desists with just the attempt. Her face becomes a little displeased and weary perhaps because of her sudden impulse to run away; on the other hand, by this time, Manab manages to perform the formalities demanded by polite behaviour. He asks, “ What are the mother and son up to?”

The girl raises her sari to veil her head and the baby’s

fingers drop out of her mouth. She stares at Ity in unnecessary silence for a while and then says, "Oh, we are just standing here."

"When did Naren go to office today? I didn't know."

"He went out very early, he will go to office via my sister's home. I did my cooking very leisurely today, I had thought I wouldn't cook today. But my brother-in-law suddenly turned up, that's why I had to cook. If I hadn't cooked and fed him well, he'd have gone back and blamed me. He'd have said, I've not only made their brother a stranger to them, but I don't even ask him to have a meal when he comes on a visit. He's just gone. Do you know why he came? To ask for money! Here; he never speaks anything but ill of me, but finding his brother out, he makes a demand of ten rupees from me. I said where am I to get the money, take it from your brother. What were you doing on the roof, Ity?"

Ity replies, "I'd gone to pay the rent, that's why."

The girl takes her little son's right hand in her left one, and once again stares at Ity in unnecessary silence. Then in a manner which gave the impression that she suddenly remembered something she says, "Oh! Yes, I haven't also paid our rent. But how was I to pay it, he only got his salary yesterday. He told me to pay it today. Wait a moment, I'll bring the money. Will you hold baby for a bit, Ity dear?"

Giving her child to Ity, jingling the bunch of keys tied to the end of her sari several times, the girl goes and

opens her box inside the room. Her property consists of a couple of boxes, but there are so many keys in the bunch that the ring can hardly hold them, and the end of her sari seems about to tear down with its weight. And the amount of unnecessary sounds she creates in opening and shutting her box is simply indescribable.

Manab asks Ity in a low voice, "Did you come to pay your rent?"

- Ity replies, "No, but I've to give her some kind of an explanation."

The baby knows Ity for a long time, practically since he was born. But perhaps because she never puts his fingers in her mouth and sucks them, that is why he does not like to stay in her arms. First the rubber dummy falls down on the ground; then the baby looks this way and that and crinkles his face; and the moment Manab gives a playful tap on his cheeks, he bursts out crying.

Melting with joy, the girl says while closing her box, "I'm coming, I'm coming, you naughty thing! Can't do without me for a minute, what a son I've got!"

She brings the rent-money, the receipt which her husband had written down for her, and a pen dipped in ink; she counts out the money to Manab, makes him sign the receipt, takes her son back in her arms and says, "You get so much money in rents. What do you do with it? You rent out the whole building and live all by yourself in the cheel-kuthi in this heat. How can you? I couldn't have done it!"

Manab tucks the money in his waist and replies, "Is there any help for it? I don't have a job like baby's father!"

Baby's mother opens her eyes wide and says, "As if you need a job! The interest that you draw every month, who knows how many times his salary it is! I'm going to lie down a little with baby now. If he goes to sleep, I'll call you Ity. The two feet and beak of the bird don't look right. How many stitches did you tell me to do? I've forgotten dear, the baby is always up to such mischief!"

Manab remarks, "Isn't somebody else mischievous too?"

"Isn't he?" The baby's mother simpers, whirls round and goes into her room. Manab picks up the pitcher, goes down one step and waits there. He turns round his face and says, "Come, why are you standing there?"

Silently Ity comes forward. The way she walks with her uneven feet on the smooth floor of the verandah is really charming. Other girls just walk, but Ity goes swaying to an unknown rhythm. She has no child in her arms; her sari-end is not weighed with the burden of a bunch of keys; still, it seems as if there are many children clinging to her back, her breast and her waist; and tied to her sari-end is a bunch of keys far heavier than any burden which she can manage to carry.

Coming down the stair, Manab says, "You people owe me five months' rent."

"Yes."

Manab remarks jokingly, "If it was any other tenant, I'd have turned them out."

"Yes."

"Are you angry, because I mentioned the rent?"

"No, no, what's there to be angry about?"

The manner of Ity's coming down the stair from the roof to the third storey had been languid and lax, now in coming down to the second it had changed to a stumbling manner as if coming down a stair was not a matter of little labour.

Manab makes his face grumpy and says, "I can't speak after weighing every word, but say whatever comes to my mind. What have I said that has turned your face so grumpy?"

Ity smiles a little, the grave expression on her face becomes lighter, "Where do you see my face getting grumpy? What a child you are! Have I got cross with you? I'm cross with that wretched inauspicious girl on the third storey. Baby's father gets only a salary of sixty-three rupees, and she's just bursting with pride!"

Manab laughs. The coarse side of a woman's nature comes out in what Ity says, Manab feels quite proud and amused, that he should be able to discern it through the sharpness of his intelligence. In the hope of finding out a few more sides of a woman's character he provokes Ity by saying, "Why, Naren Babu's wife is a very nice person."

“ Nice! What rot! It’s just because she’s living happily and her luck’s not out like mine, that’s all.”

“ Your luck’s out, is that so?”

Both of them stop short. Ity bends back like a snake ready to raise its hood and says, “ What did you say?”

Manab replies gravely, “ You’re saying your luck’s out, it’s because of me, isn’t it?”

Ity heaves a deep sigh like the hiss of a snake, but but instead of striking, she says in the manner of a mature woman who grants forgiveness and at the same time gives encouragement: “ I don’t know what to do with you! I said that because I was thinking of my parents, my brothers and sisters. Think how much they’ve to suffer. Otherwise, I—I’m a queen. Of course, I don’t look like a queen, I’m a queen because of you.”

They were people in the third and the second storey, but no one on the stair, still Ity brought down her voice to its lowest pitch and said, “ You are my king!”

The moment they came down to the second storey, a middle-aged woman came out of the room just below the one baby’s mother had gone to lie down in. The woman was so fat that even though the floor did not tremble when she walked, her footsteps resounded heavily. But just now they resounded more than usual, perhaps because she was banging her feet with extra force.

“ Where have you been, Ity ?”

“ In the third storey with baby’s mother.”

“ What rubbish! I’ve looked for you upstairs and downstairs three times.”

“ Perhaps then I had gone to the cheel-kuthi. Mother told me to go and pay the rent. Now, all this time I had been talking with baby’s mother, go and ask her. I was chatting with baby’s mother, wasn’t I Manab Babu?”

“ Of course you were.”

Ity asks again, “ Didn’t you say that the water in your pitcher was all finished? Didn’t I say come downstairs and I’ll fill it up for you?”

Manab nods in assent.

The fat woman’s complexion is exceedingly fair. Her face had been red so long, now slowly the redness begins to disappear. She stands in silence for a while; then she walks away with still more forceful steps and enters her room; she closes her door with a loud bang and shoves in the bolt. The next minute she removes the bolt and comes out, “ You die Ity, you die, you go to hell. Aren’t you lame? Isn’t it that you can’t climb stairs with your lame foot? If you can’t climb stairs why don’t you go to Yama’s (the god of death) house?”

Manab asks, “ Sudha, you didn’t go to the hospital today?”

Sudha replies, “ Can’t you see that I haven’t?”

Manab asks again, “ Have no duty today?”

Sudha suddenly comes to the verge of tears and says,

“Whether I have duty or not, what’s that to you?”

Manab says quietly, “No, I just made a remark. Will you pay some of the rent today?”

Sudha becomes stunned. She tries to bulge her eyes out of the fleshy folds round them, and says, “You’re asking for rent? Rent!”

Manab replies with a smile, “It was you who said that you’d pay some of it today.”

“I haven’t got my salary yet.”

“All right, pay me when you get it. You’re putting in a lot of advertisements asking Nagen to come back, aren’t you Sudha?”

With a face turned pale, Sudha cries out, “Who says I’m giving advertisements?”

“I saw in the paper. It’s a good advertisement: ‘How long am I to carry on alone with the children; if not for myself, come back in consideration for them—your Sudha.’ If your advertisement catches his eyes, Sudha, Nagen will rush back from wherever he is.”

Sudha does not say another word, she goes into her room again and shuts the door. This time the sound of her footsteps is gentler, and the sound of her closing the door softer.

Ity begins coming down the stair and says, “The stair seems endless.”

“Bothering you?”

“Enough, you needn’t show so much concern. How many months’ rent does Sudha owe you?”

"How many can it be, one or two months. What's the poor thing to do, with four children on her hands the world seems dark to her. Is there any money in the nursing profession?"

"Why don't you give it?"

"Why should I? What have I to do with her? I'll wait another two months, if she doesn't pay up then, I'll tell her clearly that she had better go and live in a house where she can do so without paying rent. That sort of thing won't do in my house."

Ity's stumbling manner of coming down to the second storey has now changed to her habitual twisted, broken-down manner. But on the other hand, the stair is nearly coming to an end; making a terrific effort she taps gently on Manab's arm and says with a faint smile, "How naughty you were!"

She says it in the same tone as baby's mother did when she called her child naughty. Then suddenly she asks, "Where, you didn't give?"

Manab asks, "What?"

"The ten rupees mother asked as loan? You got some rent, why don't you give it out of that?"

Manab smiles a little, brings out the money tucked in his waist and gives Ity ten rupees. She walks down with her head bowed.

On coming down, the ground-floor verandah comes into view. Sitting on a mat spread on the verandah, leaning against the wall, Ity's mother is dozing. Lying

next to her, is a naked boy of about three whose body is covered with sores. At the other end of the verandah a pile of dirty dishes are lying. Several flies are buzzing around; when they get tired of the taste of the juice oozing from the child's sores they fly over to the dirty dishes. Again, when they tire of the taste of the dirty dishes they fly back to settle on the child's sores.

Ity's mother's doze was not quite a sleep, it was just a closing of the eyes. It was not that she was pretending to sleep, but her eyes had closed in sheer fatigue and weakness.

Ity's mother opens her eyes and says, "You've come Ity?"

Then she looks at Manab's face and says, "You took a pitcher of water this morning, it's all finished? Ity, go child, fill up the pitcher and take it up. Is that sort of thing a man's job?"

Manab says, "It tires Ity to climb up the stair, I'll manage to take it up."

Ity's mother does not hear this. She fixes her gaze on her daughter's feet and says, "What's that blood on you Ity?"

Ity replies quite unperturbed, "I scratched a sore."

Manab asks, "Have you got a sore Ity?"

On hearing this question, without any preliminaries, Ity suddenly bursts out in a wild rage. She begins to cry out as if screaming in pain: "Yes, I've got sores, hundreds of them. What will you do? You'll loathe me? Do

it, who cares for your loathing? Don't you see my brother's body is full of sores? Don't you know that I take him in my arms? If I don't get sores what will I get?"

As she hurriedly puts down the pitcher it rolls into the courtyard and smashes to pieces. Manab does not even glance at it. "Go to your room Ity, I'll send Sudha to you."

With that Manab begins to climb up the stair, leaping over three or four steps like a superman.



MANINDRALAL BOSE



VERONAL

AFTER VISITING VARIOUS PLACES IN NORTH INDIA I HAD arrived in Naini Tal. It was the end of November and the hill-station was practically empty. There were just two of us on the first floor of our hotel—a Bengali doctor and myself. The hotel was on top of the hill, by the side of a wood; down below the mountain-encircled lake sometimes glittered like an emerald, and sometimes like a molten sapphire. The days were clear and bright with sunshine, the nights pale and chilly in the cold moonlight, all around us was a lovely peaceful silence.

The whole day the waters of the lake had been still and had clearly mirrored the rows of colourful bungalows, the green woods, the blue sky, and piles of white woolly clouds; so many colours and shapes. In the evening, on the western sky, colour had piled upon colour, in such magnificence, that it seemed as if the brides of the four guardians of the East, West, North and South, were celebrating the Holi festival in the sky; and the lake was a pool of pure gold. Then the moon rose behind the pine-woods, and in the dark shadow of the hills, the lake became black and mysterious as the eyes of an enchanting woman.

When I came and sat in the glazed verandah after dinner, it was raining, and in the damp darkness outside, the deodar trees vibrated with the angry howl of the stormy wind.

I could not sit in the verandah for long, not because of the storm, but because my tooth began to ache violently.

For the last two days a corner of my left gum had been slightly painful, but now all of a sudden at the middle of night, in the midst of the storm, the pain became unbearable; it felt as if every nerve was being torn to pieces, it was just awful. I went to my room and found that I had no aspirin or any kind of pain-killing medicine with me. It was nearly twelve o'clock at night, the storm roared outside, where could I go for some medicine?

Then I remembered that old Dr. Sirkar was staying in the room beyond the two vacant ones next to mine. I would surely be able to get some kind of medicine from him. One day I had made a slight acquaintance with him. He seemed to be a strange sort of person. He had been round the world twice. Some days, I saw him lounging in an easy chair in the verandah, quietly watching the play of clouds in the sky and the change of colours on the lake for hours together; on other days, whip in hand he went off riding at a terrific pace towards Bhimtal. Six feet tall, his figure was firm and sturdy like the trunk of an old teak tree; he invariably wore a grey tweed suit most of the time and a pair of dark glasses over his eyes; his lined, wrinkled face was flushed and below the thick celluloid frame of his glasses his nose burnt red.

My toothache became worse and utterly unbearable. There was nothing else to do, but to go to the doctor. A dim light was burning at one end of the corridor. I knocked softly thrice and called, "Dr. Sirkar!"

From inside came the answer, "Entrez."

The door was not locked and I pushed it open.

When I entered the room, I found Dr. Sirkar lying half-raised on a long leather-covered settee and gazing at the window in front of him. Rain was beating like the waves of an angry ocean against the window panes. Outside, the storm moaned shrilly, but inside—the room was filled with a strange silence.

The door was at the back of the settee and Dr. Sirkar who had not seen me enter called out, "Come in Herr Rosenberg, I was waiting for you."

Herr Rosenberg! But I had not seen anyone who could possibly be a German, in this hotel. I cried loudly, "Excuse me, but my toothache's just unbearable—"

With a start he jumped up. I could not see his eyes covered by the dark lenses of his glasses, only a glisten of white hair on his forehead. He said, "Oh! You! What do you want?"

"You see, my tooth is giving me a lot of pain. If you have any medicine, I've no aspirin—"

"Pain! Good, the more pain you suffer, the more deeply you will sense life. The higher the species of a being, the greater is his capacity for feeling pain."

"Look here, if the doctor becomes a philosopher, his patient's condition just becomes awful."

"Ha! Ha! A doctor-philosopher! Now tell me where is the pain?"

"In my tooth, here on this left gum, it's tearing my nerves to bits—"

"Enough, I understand, you don't have to describe the pain to me. Sit down, sit on that sofa. What liqueur do you prefer—Kummel, Benedictine—I've only a few varieties with me here."

On a small table in front of him there were a number of bottles of different sizes, shapes and colours, and several liqueur glasses.

"No, I don't drink anything."

"You don't? Ha! Ha! If you did, you wouldn't have had a toothache. You are suffering a lot, let me see, I've got a medicine."

Dr. Sirkar took out a small bottle from the drawer of his writing table, then placed two tablets from it in a medium-sized wineglass and poured a golden liquid from a large bottle over it. He stirred it, handed me the glass and said, "Drink it up, I've mixed the medicine with a little light Bordeaux, which will help in its action. I've no water in my room, my servant has disappeared since evening. Think of it, your medicine is mixed with the juice of sun-ripe red grapes of Southern France."

If someone gave me a glass of poison to remove my pain I would have taken it then, so I drank up the medicated Bordeaux in one gulp.

Dr. Sirkar sat leaning on the settee facing me. He drank a sip of Chartreuse from a small glass and asked, "How are you feeling now?"

"The pain seems much less."

"Then that's all right. Perhaps the actual pain is just

the same, but since you feel it's gone, that's enough. The real thing is what we feel, and whatever we can't feel with our mind is unreal. Sit down, and let's talk. We shan't get any sleep in any case, on this stormy night!"

"That's nice, tell me a story, you have so much experience of life; you have travelled so widely, seen so many countries and people. Then you are a doctor, you have come across so many patients—"

"A doctor looks at his patient with a clinical eye, he doesn't really see him. A view which includes no sense of pain, which arouses no feeling in the heart, no fear in the mind, is not really looking at someone."

"But there may be joy in it."

"Yes, but every deep feeling of joy is always accompanied with a sharp sense of pain. It's not only mental pain, but physical pain also. The more variety of pain you experience, the more deeply you will understand life, and touch the very core of your being. The experience we gain from physical and mental pain formulates our very existence and our individuality."

"I feel your life is full of many experiences."

"Yes, the thirst for experience has driven me hither and thither all my life. As a doctor I have had to see man in the breaking-up of his body and mind; in his image of uttermost pain. That is why I have travelled from country to country in search of beauty, whether that beauty is of Nature or man-made, I have sought to find it in its completeness. With my body and soul, with

the flow of blood in every artery and vein, I have striven to sense the joy of living. On such a stormy night as this I swam across the Padma; I have seen towns and villages washed away in terrific floods; I have crossed icebound rivers at a height of 17,000 ft. on the Karakoram mountains and travelled to Khotan by foot from Kashmir; I have crossed the Sahara desert by car; and shot lions in Uganda. So many wonderful things, so many beautiful sights float across my vision; the colours on the Dal Lake in Srinagar at evening; the sun-baths in the Lido on the shores of the Mediterranean; the sledge-rides in moonlight on the winter snows of Switzerland; the crowds of Fifth Avenue in New York; the wild beauty of forest-surrounded Ankor-wat; the trenches in Flanders; the Taj Mahal on a dark night; the Kumbh-mela at Prayag; the thick forests of the Mississippi; an aeroplane across the Pacific. All these experiences have embodied my soul; but my being has been expressed through the pain and suffering the human mind is capable of sensing."

Dr. Sirkar became silent. The window panes rattled with a gust of stormy wind. From its one end to the other, the dark sky was scared with a terrific flash of lightning. The lamp fringed with a dark-blue shade trembled again and again. I asked softly, "Who is this Herr Rosenberg you were waiting for?"

Dr. Sirkar sat up with a start; the glasses on his eyes shone in the light like the eyes of a tiger on a dark night. He poured a little wine into his glass, drank a

gulp and continued to sit in silence for a while.

Then he pushed a cigar-box towards me and said, "Light a cigar. I'll tell you the story—"

"After I passed my examination and got my medical degree in Munsen, I worked in a tuberculosis sanatorium at Davos in Switzerland. From there, once I came to Paris towards the end of November. When I got off at the Gare de Lyon, it was about 11 o'clock at night. I was handing over my luggage to the porter when someone thumped on my overcoat and called, 'Herr doctor!'

"I turned round and saw Richard Rosenberg, one of the patients at our sanatorium. He was a man of about forty, taller than myself; a face thin and pale with long years of illness, and a keen, hungry look in his eyes. He had tuberculosis in one of the bones of his foot, which had got well after being treated for six years in the sanatorium; now, he could walk about with the help of a crutch. He was a Swiss, but his ancestors had come from Norway. He was the only son of a rich merchant in Zurich.

"I asked him in surprise, 'You here? You had fever the day before yesterday, and you are not supposed to come out of the sanatorium!'

" 'I've run away. My heart felt sick. Which hotel are you going to?'

" 'I know a cheap hotel in Latin Quarter, I've written

to them for a room.'

" 'I'll go with you. I won't like being all alone in a big hotel. It's a students' hostel, isn't it?'

" In the taxi Rosenberg told me he often suffered from excruciating headaches, he believed a cancer was growing in his brain; some doctor in Zurich told him that it might be a small tumour. He had taken permission from the sanatorium to come to Paris to consult specialists. But he believed that he had a cancer growing somewhere.

" I didn't quite believe what he told me. I fixed a room near my own in the hotel for Rosenberg. I was about to go to bed when Rosenberg came in, he had changed his travelling clothes and was all dressed up. He said, 'Come, let's go out.'

" 'I'm tired.'

" 'I've come to Paris after six years, do you think I'll go to bed now? Tender is the night—'

" 'You go out, I've undressed.'

" 'I shan't be able to sleep if I don't take a stroll on the banks of the Seine. Right, then, bon nuit!'

" Lying in my bed I heard Rosenberg go down the narrow wooden stairs with a clut-clat of crutches, to seek joy in the streets of Paris. Next morning on enquiry I learnt that Rosenberg was still sleeping. He came back drunk at three in the morning. I didn't meet him for a week after this.

" I came out into the street from the Opera House after seeing a performance of Puccini's *Tosca*, someone slapped

my back and cried, 'Herr doctor!' I turned round to see Richard Rosenberg!

" 'How did you like the opera, Herr doctor?'

" 'Lovely.'

" 'Do come with me, there's an Italian restaurant nearby, they have some wonderful Moselle. It's a pre-war 1913 Moselle, I'll really feel hurt if you don't come.'

"The music was still ringing in my ears and my mind. I could still hear the noble tones of Chaliapin's wonderful voice. I said, 'All right, let's go and have a rowdy night.'

"We had some food at the restaurant, then went and sat in a café near the Opera House. On both sides of the road, half of each footpath was set out with chairs and small tables; by their side, men and women dressed in a variety of garb, flowed past in a constant stream.

" 'Rosenberg, how are you enjoying the life in Paris?'

" 'A terrible pain, I suffer unbearable pain in my head.' He brought out a small bottle from his pocket, took two tablets from it and gulped them down with coffee. 'I'm taking this aspirin every two hours, otherwise I'd die of pain.'

" 'Have you consulted any doctor?'

" 'Yes, of course. Dr. Levi said it's not in my head, but there seems to be a tumour near my liver. It may be a forerunner of cancer. But I know it is cancer, it has to be cancer. My mother died of cancer. Oh God! What agony it was!'

“ He stopped speaking abruptly. I saw his burning eyes were fixed on the gaudily dressed women of the streets. Three of them were passing along hunting for prey. They gave a mocking look at the crutches resting on Rosenberg’s chair and walked away. His thin face turned still paler. ‘ But, the doctors haven’t said anything for certain, have they?’ I asked.

“ ‘ Who can say anything for certain? Day and night I’m suffering such awful pain. I’ve seen a cancer patient die by inches, I know all the symptoms of cancer. Garcon, fill up the glasses. But you are a doctor, tell me is there any cure for cancer?’

“ ‘ We don’t know yet, but experiments are going on all the time.’

“ ‘ Meanwhile the patient dies after going through unbearable agony!’

“ ‘ One day we will all have to die.’

“ ‘ Supposing a cancer patient commits suicide, what harm is there?’

“ ‘ Life is precious. We haven’t yet been able to give life, what right have we to wilfully destroy it?’

“ ‘ Oh no, we have only the right to suffer. I can easily commit suicide, I have no mother, my father too died two months ago; only my old grandmother is alive, it would give her a terrible shock. Garcon, change this note.’

“ The waiter came forward. Rosenberg brought out a fat wallet from his breast pocket, it was stuffed with notes of various colours. He picked out a thousand franc note

and gave it to the waiter. He put the open wallet on the table; not only the people in the café, but all the passers-by saw it lying there crammed with notes.

“ ‘Put away your wallet, Richard.’

“ ‘Huh! There’s more than thirty thousand francs in mark, franc, pound and dollar notes in it.’

“ ‘He said this so loud that everyone, including people on the street, heard him. Everyone in the café stared at our table in amazement.

“ ‘Hush, why are you shouting so much? Put it in your pocket. What do you mean by carrying such a lot of money about with you in the streets of Paris?’

“ ‘Yes, what do I mean? Well said, doctor. Well, I’m giving you a puzzle, answer me. A man carries thirty thousand francs, shows it to everyone and walks about on the streets of Paris. Why? Ha! Ha! But isn’t life a maze? Once you enter it, you can’t always find your way out!’

“ ‘Look here, people have been murdered on the streets of Paris for a lesser amount of money.’

“ ‘Good, well said! Listen doctor, I’m glad I met you. You know my condition, anything can happen at any time, I may die very suddenly. I’m a millionaire now, I want to bequeath half of my wealth to a cancer research hospital; I’ve left a will, not in my room in the sanatorium, I’ve hidden it somewhere, I want to tell you where it is—’

“ ‘Rosenberg stopped abruptly and looked towards the street. A young man and woman were passing by; the

man was grim and hideous looking, his looks indicated that he belonged to the underworld of Paris. But the young woman was exceedingly beautiful, she looked lovely and enchanting as a newly blossomed white lotus.

"Rosenberg got up and called out looking towards the couple, 'Madeleine!' The girl smiled and came forward and sat down on the chair between us. But her companion disappeared into the crowd.

"'Hello Madeleine! What will you have?'

- "'Let's go to a restaurant, I haven't had anything to eat since evening, I feel very hungry!'

"Madeleine's eyes were alight with gaiety, Rosenberg gazed at her spellbound. Softly he said, 'We've just had some food, take this, you can eat tomorrow morning!' Rosenberg brought out a five hundred franc note from his wallet and gave it to her. Once again everyone had a view of his roll of notes. Madeleine's eyes flashed like lightning.

"I said, 'It's very late, let's go now.'

"'We'll go too, come Madeleine.'

"The girl sat between us in the taxi, I kept silent, but Rosenberg talked away incessantly.

"'Look here doctor, I can't sleep without taking veronal every night. Do you know of any good medicine for sleep? Oh, I know, you won't give it to me.'

"The girl laughed and said, 'I know.'

"Eagerly Rosenberg asked, 'What?'

"She laughed loudly and replied, 'I won't tell you.'

"All the way Rosenberg discussed with me the virtues and drawbacks of veronal, he took three to four tablets every night; how many tablets would be likely to kill a man; someone in Davos had taken too many veronal tablets by mistake and died, and so on.

"On reaching the hotel I called Rosenberg aside and asked him, 'Who is the girl?'

"'Who?' he replied, 'How am I to know? I don't know her.'

"'Then you don't know her!' I ejaculated in surprise. 'You have so much money with you; you had better do something about your wallet—I saw a car following our taxi.'

"A strange smile flashed across Rosenberg's thin pale face, 'Herr doctor, whom does anyone know in this world!'

"Rosenberg went to his room accompanied by the girl. I went to my room and sat down exhausted on a sofa. It was drizzling outside, the wind moaned through the empty dark lane next to the hotel like the ceaseless wailing of a mad dog. Silence reigned in the sleeping hotel.

"I felt that one could not hope for sleep on such a night. The old eighteenth century clock on the mantelpiece stared vacantly at me. I picked up a volume of Maupassant's stories and began to read.

"I don't know when I had gone to sleep, the rattling of glass on the window-panes woke me up. A gale was blowing and it was snowing. Nature's fury seemed to be

let loose outside, blasts of thunder and flashes of lightning; but the hotel seemed unnaturally silent.

"Suddenly I started, what has been happening in Rosenberg's room, who knows? The girl must have done her job and departed. The tap in the bathroom was not properly turned off, and drop by drop it was dripping.

"I felt someone was calling me, 'Herr doctor! Herr doctor!' The cry seemed to penetrate through the wooden door from beyond the dark corridor. I got up and slowly opened my door, the corridor was dark, but a chink of light entered into the darkness from Rosenberg's room—through its door which was slightly open. That light gave me courage. Quickly I crossed the corridor and entered his room. The room was pervaded with a strange silence and Rosenberg lay on his bed. He hadn't taken off his clothes. He was lying absolutely still, his eyes were staring; on a small marble table lay an empty phial of veronal, two empty bottles of wine and two glasses. The girl was nowhere to be seen.

"I called, 'Rosenberg! Richard!' But he gave no response. I felt his forehead, it was ice-cold. I felt his pulse and it was still. I opened his shirt front and pressed my ear on his chest to see if I could hear even a faint heart-beat. But his heart-beats had stopped for ever. Outside the stormy wind was roaring.

"I realised there was nothing for me to do. I softly closed his eyes and covered him up with a sheet: I felt exhausted, returned to my room and when I sat down on

the sofa, perspiration broke out all over my body in spite of the winter night.

"Again I seemed to hear someone calling me: 'Doctor! Herr doctor!' That cry seemed to have pierced through the door, and filled the entire room like smoke. I lighted a cigarette, opened a window, in the hope that the howling of the wind outside might drown this cry.

"The cry became louder and louder, not only I heard my name but the clat-clat sound of a pair of crutches climbing up the wooden stairs. It made the stillness of the sleeping hotel tremble. The sound of crutches came nearer, passed the row of rooms through the corridor and stopped in front of my room. Someone knocked thrice and called: "Herr doctor."

"I said, 'Entrez.' I should have fainted in fear, but I was waiting to taste the emotion of utmost fear; I was ready to face Rosenberg's ghost.

"Slowly the door opened. Against the background of darkness the figure of Rosenberg emerged like a picture. He was wearing a thick black overcoat and a grey hat, his arms rested on a pair of crutches. The light in my room was reflected on his face and it shone like glass. The sharp, hungry look had gone from his eyes, they were filled with a drowsy weariness.

"I heard his voice as if it was relayed on the radio, he said, 'Herr doctor, I'm going out. I came to tell you about my will. It's in the sanatorium, in the third drawer of the table in Frau Meyer's room. All right, bon nuit,

I've a long way to go.'

"The figure disappeared. I stared dazed towards the darkness. The clut-clat of crutches went further and further away.

"At last I began shivering, my hands and feet grew cold and clammy, I could hear the hammering of my heart. Rosenberg's dead body lay two doors away.

"Suddenly someone switched on the light in the corridor. The stairs resounded with the gay voices and laughter of a group of young Chinese boy and girl students. They usually didn't come back to the hotel before two o'clock every morning.

"The group dispersed and went to their rooms and closed their doors. The hotel went to sleep again and became silent.

"The storm ended, but snow was falling softly as if someone was tearing petals off the quivering Champaka flower.

"I lighted a cigarette and sat down in front of the open window and waited for the morning to dawn."

Dr. Sirkar became silent and I too pulled at my cigar in silence. The storm and rain had ceased and everything was bathed in soft moonlight. I got up slowly.

Dr. Sirkar said, "Mr. Ghosh, I feel tonight also I won't be able to sleep. Nowadays I can't sleep unless I take veronal."

These words filled me with a strange fear. The voice did not sound like Dr. Sirkar's.

"Look, there's a small bottle there, yes—that yellow bottle. I can't get up, my legs are aching. Get me some tablets out of it and put it into this glass."

In a frightened voice I asked, "How many?"

"How many? Oh, five or six. It doesn't have any bad effect on me—I can't sleep with less. If you took six, perhaps—"

Like a man in a spell, mechanically I gave Dr. Sirkar six tablets. He took them in one gulp and said, "Do sit down for a while." Then he closed his eyes and lay down leaning back on the settee.

I sat in silence, I felt as if I could not move. The stillness of the room was as heavy as a stone. The glass panes of the window shone like the frightened eyes of a veiled woman.

I do not know how long I had sat there. I had lost sense of the fleeting flow of time.

I felt I heard a clut-clat sound, the sound of crutches against a wooden floor. It climbed up the stairs past my room, the verandah, then stopped in front of Dr. Sirkar's room. Tock! Tock! Tock! Three knocks.

I trembled with fear. I screamed, "Dr. Sirkar," but no response. I shouted with all my might. "Dr. Sirkar! Doctor!" But his body lay numb and senseless.

I caught hold of his hand and shook him, the hands were ice-cold, I could not find his pulse. I put my hand

below his nose, my ear on his heart, but his heart was still, his blood was no longer circulating.

Dr. Sirkar was dead? Perhaps I had given him an overdose of veronal, my face turned pale like a white mask

I looked towards the door with wild frightened eyes. On the other side of the door was Rosenberg's ghost, and on this side—the dead body of Dr. Sirkar.

The two eyes behind the dark glasses moved, I shivered violently.

Dr. Sirkar called out, "Why, Mr. Ghosh, is your tooth aching again?"

"No."

"Then you are frightened. No, I didn't die, death doesn't come so easily."

"I thought—"

"Yes, you probably can realise to some extent the fear I experienced that night in the hotel in Paris."

"You are an excellent actor, I see."

"It's only because I can act that I am still alive. You had better go to bed. Rosenberg didn't come tonight. You can go to sleep in peace. You'd better have some, you'll sleep better. Listen, I haven't told you the end of the story. Next day Rosenberg's dead body couldn't be found. Two days later his body was dragged out of the Seine. People say that the gang had removed his body during the night. But my theory is that Madeleine didn't

kill him. What do you say?"

I came away without giving any reply. In my room I sat beside an open window. The waters of the lake shone in the moonlight.

I sat wondering: was Dr. Sirkar mad or was he an expert story-teller?

MANOJE BASU



BANAMARMAR

OR

Forest-Murmurs

THE DIVISION WAS NOT A VERY SMALL ONE, ITS SURVEY had begun since November and only Khanapuri area had been measured so far. In a row three tents were pitched underneath the banyan tree which stood on the river shore banked up with edible herbs like hinchā and kulmi. On every side open fields stretched out wide.

The Deputy Magistrate, Shanker, had come here today from the 'sudder' camp in town to decide a very complicated law-suit. He was a young man—quick and restless. His restlessness seemed to have increased ever since his wife had died. He sent for the court clerk immediately on arrival.

After sending for him, he got out a cigar from a box in which still remained the few dried bael leaves put there seven months ago.

Seven months ago, one afternoon in his paternal house, Shanker on entering the upstairs room had asked, "Sudharani, what day is it tomorrow?"

Sudha answered, "Go and look at the almanac, I don't know—" then opening her eyes wide she had said with a laugh, "You are trying to frighten me because you are going away. Oh, you think I—"

Shanker had also laughed a lot. He had said, "If you tell me not to go, perhaps, I won't go."

"Let it be."

"What does it mean? That it isn't hurting me at all to go away? Isn't that it?"

Sudharani went on folding clothes without answer-

ing. Shanker caught her hand and drew her close.

"Listen Sudharani, answer me—"

"Bah! As if I know what is in somebody else's mind."

"You know what is in yours, don't you?" But still when she did not speak, Shanker went on saying, "Tell me whether it hurts you to part from me. I won't let you go unless you tell me."

"No."

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"No! No! No!" With that Sudha pulled away her hand and was going out when Shanker went and barred the way of the run-away girl. "It's a lie, let me see your eyes. Now, look at me Sudharani—"

Sudha then closed her eyes and kept them shut tight. As soon as he turned round her face, tears began trickling down her cheeks. Slipping round this way and that, his bride eluded him and disappeared.

Towards early morning, it was raining hard. Laksman called from outside, "Young master, the steamer whistle is blowing at the landing ghat."

Sudharani put the end of her saree round her neck, touched his feet in obeisance, and said, "Do wait a moment!" Then she brought a sheaf of bael leaves from a niche where she had arranged and kept them; putting these in his hand she called upon the Goddess Durga to protect him, "Durga! Durga!" she cried, then continued, "Write me one letter a week at least, wherever you may be. Understand?"

Then another afternoon like today's came to his mind. He was busy doing his work of surveying in the Mamood-pur camp when a letter came to tell him that Sudharani was dead.

Meanwhile, Bhajahari, the court clerk, arrived with maps and files.

"Two hundred ten, eleven, north of this is plot number two hundred twelve." Bhajahari marked the spot in the map and continued, "It's only an uncultivated patch of jungle; no human being ever goes there, still the suit is all over this plot of land." Suddenly Bhajahari looked up and realised that he was wasting his breath. Shanker probably had not looked even once at the papers. He was staring at the fields on the north and whistling absent-mindedly, his cigar had gone out.

But Bhajahari continued, "Yes, see the black line beyond that clump of palm trees, the forest begins from there; one can't realise it from here but it covers a lot of land. Now you had better look at the records, huzur. It's a very complicated affair."

"Yes, yes," answered Shanker feeling slightly embarrassed because of his inattention and concentrated his mind on the papers before him. When he had gone through the records, he found that the name of the owner of Plot No. 212 was written down as Dhananjoy Chakladar.

Bhajahari began again, "First I had put down that one name as the owner, now look, underneath it I've had to write seven more names in pencil. Every day a few more new owners crop up. There are eight of them now, but at this rate they will soon become twenty, and there won't be any space left on this page to hold more names."

Shanker said, "Twenty owners! Huh! I'll put an end to all that today. What time have you told them to come?"

"In the evening. They are all busy during the day, so they may be late, but it won't matter. It's a moonlit night."

For a little while longer Shanker turned over the files, then he ordered his horse to be saddled. He said, "I'll take a turn round the fields. How long can one go on sitting cramped inside this little tent? But this is a nice place you've selected for camping. Those are Bhant flowers, aren't they? But I don't know whether I ought to laugh or cry seeing the state of the river bund."

He pondered over something, then said, "Oh, let the horse be. Why not let's go for a walk round the forest instead? It can't be more than a mile. What do you say? An afternoon walk in the open keeps one fit. Come on, let's go."

The crops had already been garnered from the fields. There was no one anywhere. Shanker was walking in front and Bhajahari followed him. There was a deep,

wide ravine in front of the forest. Evidently, corn was cultivated on the slopes, the stubbles still remained; by its side was a high mud-bank.

When he came to this spot Shanker said, "Was there ever a big canal from the river here?"

Bhajahari replied, "No, huzur. This is not the bed of a canal, it was a moat and the forest in front was once a fort."

"Fort?"

"Yes sir, Rajaram's Fort. It is said, long ago someone named Rajaram had built a fort here. There is nothing left of that now. It has all turned into a jungle."

They continued to walk in silence. Then Shanker asked, "I hope there aren't any tigers in there?"

Bhajahari replied contemptuously, "Tiger? Open fields stretch out on all sides, how can there be any tigers—but I'm told that in previous years one or two fat cattle-thieving wolves did come out. However, this year we have made things too hot for them." With a laugh he continued, "Haven't we created a lot of trouble, huzur? Morning, noon and evening, with a compass and chains on our shoulders, we are at it the whole day long! You see that road, we cleared the jungle and made it. Before, there was no way through. None of the people in these parts ever go into this jungle."

As soon as they entered the forest they felt as if the sun had suddenly gone down and it had turned into night. The trees were thick with branches. Most of them

were Mango and Jack-fruit trees. Their thick bark had cracked to pieces and the tree-trunks looked like monstrous crocodiles. They were covered with mildew and moss; the interstices were entwined with creepers. One could hardly believe that once upon a time these trees had been planted and reared by the hands of man. The winter, summer and monsoons of countless centuries had blown over these trees and in their roots they had hidden, who knew what strange mysteries of those ancient times, which they had not even allowed the sun's rays to peep at and spy out.

They had been walking for some time when Shanker suddenly stood still. "It looks nice and open there. That's a shimmer of water, isn't it?"

The clerk replied, "Its name is Panka Dighi—the big slime pond."

"Is it very slimy?"

"Perhaps, but some people say the name Panka Dighi has come from Pankhi Dighi—the Pond of the Peacock Barge."

Then Bhajahari began telling the story: "It is said, that once upon a time, a beautiful peacock barge used to float on the dark waters of this pond. It was very big and had two rooms, and was pulled with six pairs of oars. Though it was so big and heavy, yet with the turn of a small plank in its bottom, in a moment the barge could be sunk beneath the waters of the lake. In those days there was neither law nor order in the land. Mugs from

Chittagong came and looted; then there was constant rivalry between the different Zamindars. In the home of every rich man there were secret store-rooms and secret underground passages. Well-to-do folk always kept ready ways and means in order to be able to fly when the need arose, or at least to be able to die honourably. On the surface there was nothing to indicate anything secret about the barge. The front was chiseled in the shape of a peacock's neck and painted simulating it beautifully. It is said that sometimes very late in the night when everyone went to sleep Rajaram's eldest son, Janakiram, went for a sail with his young wife Malatimala. The beautiful sails unfurled like a peacock's tail and the barge swung across the lake in the soft evening breeze. The story of Malatimala has been the subject of many ballads composed and sung by the peasants. The day before Poush-Sankranti (the last day of the month of Poush) they go singing those songs from door to door gathering new rice and molasses. Then next day they bake cakes with that rice and molasses, and all of them have a grand feast."

Bhajahari and Shanker had arrived near the shore of the lake. There was no track to its edge. But Shanker was not the one to give up so easily; breaking down bushes, pushing away thorns, he went forward. Bhajahari waited behind under the hanging branch of a tree.

High up on the slopes of the pond was a jungle of reeds, then began a tangle of water-plants and lilies.

From branches of trees overhanging the lake, streamers of the Gulancha creeper flowed down to meet its waters, which could be seen beyond this tangle—water, as black as a crow's eyes. Startled by the crashing sound of Shanker's feet some water-birds rushed into the jungle of reeds. A little to the right, beneath the thorn bushes, one could see the remains of a stone-paved bathing ghat. Near that old ghat lay a mountainous pile of thin, ancient bricks.

Long ago, on many a beautiful night of that forgotten century perhaps Janakiram had come tiptoeing down to these steps, holding his beloved by the hand; and here, together they had stepped into the peacock barge. In the shadow of that deep forest Shanker suddenly seemed to lose all sense of time and place.

"No! No! I feel frightened. Supposing someone sees us."

"Who will see us? No one is awake now. Come on Malatimala, be a good girl, let's go."

"No, no, I beg of you, not tonight."

Once upon a time that tomb-like heap of old bricks had contained big rooms, verandahs and windows. Perhaps, somewhere there—upon a star-spangled night, enchanted by the ecstatic description of the peacock barge, the eyes of a slim beautiful princess—the heir's bride—had danced with glee and greed; lest anyone should hear its sound, perhaps her husband had taken off the anklet-bells from his bride's feet. Like thieves, the two had

quickly tiptoed through the back door, slipping out of the sleeping palace they had come to the ghat and got into the boat. No one in the palace knew of it.

Conversation went on in whispers. Behind a transparent cloud, the moon was smiling faintly; lest the splashing sound betrayed them, they had not even lowered the oars. The wind alone carried the peacock barge to the middle of the pond, and it floated away—far, far beyond the evil of lost centuries—it floated away—where?

Thinking of all this Shanker suddenly felt frightened. Deep silence has a language of its own, one can only realise it if one comes to a place like this, at such an hour of the day. On all sides the forest seemed to murmur and speak to him in a strange language. He felt afraid that should he stand here, still and silent for a little while longer, he would become frozen and inanimate like one of those old tree-trunks and turn into a part of this forest kingdom. He would not have the strength to move any longer. Suddenly he became wide awake and fixed his mind on his real self—he was a government officer, he must remember his power and glory—his future. He gave his mind a shaking up and kept reminding it of all this. Then called out to the clerk, “Bhajahari! Bhajahari!”

Bhajahari reminded him, “It is getting late, huzur.”

* * * * *

When they came near the camp Shanker broke into a laugh and asked, "Are there dacoits round our camp? What a crowd! Good heavens!" Then he tried to clear the cobwebs which had gathered on his mind a little while ago with another burst of laughter and went on saying, "I'm sick of smoking cigars. Please arrange to get me a hubble-bubble. Then I can indulge in a smoke in our traditional manner."

The clerk too laughed and replied, "Will there be any dearth of hubble-bubbles? Before the order is out of your mouth, twenty silver-mounted hubble-bubbles will arrive from the village, you wait and see."

All the people from the village, both high and low, had gathered in the camp. Seeing Bhajahari and Shanker they moved away respectfully and gave way to them. In about ten minutes, Shanker came out of his tent and sat down to hear the case. He said, "Only verbal evidence won't be enough, bring whatever documents you have to me one by one. First, Dhananjoy Chakladar, you come forward."

Dhananjoy came and stood before him. In his hand he held a yellow parchment marked with black stamps, moth-eaten and written all over in ancient Bengali script, tied up in a roll like a horoscope. Shanker was unable to read much of it. But Bhajahari held up the hurricane lantern and read it out from beginning to end without

any difficulty. It was a deed of sale in which it was said that one Doyal Krishna Chakravarty had sold the famous Rajaram's Fort with 112 bighas of tax-free land together with garden, pond, etc. to Taranchandra Chakladar, while in sound mind and body and of his own free will.

Shanker queried, "That Taranchandra Chakladar was some relation of yours, was he, Dhananjoy Babu?"

Dhananjoy replied enthusiastically, "You've got it right, huzur. Taranchandra was my great-grandfather. My grandfather was Kailashchandra. From the year '83 I've been paying the cess for all this tax-free land to the Collectorate. I've got the letter giving Goodive Sahib's Survey report. Look at the date of the deed, huzur."

He was going to say a lot more, but among those present many voices cried out, "No! No!" They too had also put down their names as the owners of Rajaram's Fort. They had been holding their patience with difficulty so long, but now they could no longer keep quiet and a babel of voices broke out. A shout from Shanker, however, silenced them. Shanker whispered to Bhajahari, "You have correctly written Chakladar's name as owner; he is the real owner. The objections are all baseless. I'll dismiss the case."

Bhajahari looked around suspiciously and said, "It's very difficult to find out who the real owner is, huzur."

"But he has produced a deed made out in the Bengali year 1219."

Bhajahari replied, "There is a man in Hatgara village—give him nine four anna bits, why, 1219 is only yesterday, he will prepare you a deed identical with those of Akhbar Badshah's reign; compare it with an original and you won't be able to recognise which is real and which is faked."

Really, when the deeds of the other seven owners were called for and inspected, it was found that Bhajahari was right. Each one produced an old deed similar to Dhananjay's and each of them was so well drafted, that whichever deed was inspected, one felt sure that Rajaram's Fort belonged only to the man who possessed that particular deed. This was like getting into a maze. After a lot of debating it could not be proved whose name was to be deleted and whose was to be kept. At last Shanker gave up all hope of being able to come to a decision and appealed to these men, "Listen, you are all sons of gentlemen—"

"Yes! Yes!" They all admitted to being sons of gentlemen.

"This one plot can't belong to all eight of you, can it?"

All of them shook their heads meaning, "Of course not."

"Now come and swear who is the real owner."

The gentlemen's sons were quite undaunted, one by one each of them came forward and swore in the name of God that Plot No. 212 belonged to him and him

only. The others were all intriguing and telling lies.

After they departed Shanker said, "No! These people are really too clever for me. I feel great respect for them."

Bhajahari smiled, he had witnessed many such cases. Shanker continued, "I agree with you that some of these deeds may be forged, but what about those which are registered? Just see how far-sighted these people were. They had been preparing for this case from two generations back. Anyway, let the deeds go. You have made inquiries in the village, what did you find out? I will prepare the record somehow now and later we will decide what to do."

Bhajahari said, "I have asked so many people before you came, I called up so many witnesses, but that is funnier still. Each one says something entirely different." He suddenly burst out laughing, then said, "We couldn't get proper evidence in the land of the living, perhaps we could come to a decision if we could interview the Kumar Bahadur—"

Shanker could not understand what he was driving at. Bhajahari explained, "By Kumar Bahadur I mean Janakiram. You remember the story I was telling you about the peacock barge. The people in the village here say that when they go to sleep Janakiram comes riding on a horse at the speed of an arrow through the north field,

and jumping across that Kakkati canal he goes to meet Malatimala every night. It is a very strange story. You are not too busy now to hear it, are you?"

It was very late at night, there was not a sound anywhere and the lamps in the three tents were out, but Shanker could not sleep. He lit a cigar, came out and began strolling on the field.

Bhajahari had said, "Not only to the jungle alone, huzur, no one comes in the evening to these open fields. This was the same field, the same battle arena and the enemies had come by way of the river. No sooner than the sun had set, the five hundred shield-bearing warriors of Rajaram were annihilated. They had pulled those five hundred corpses by the legs and thrown them into the river next day—"

Sitting on the grass, Shanker absent-mindedly blew puffs of cigar smoke.

Four hundred years ago, on another evening, this field, by the side of the village and the river, had been flooded with moonlight just as it was tonight. The battle was over and the battle-field was filled with a terrible eerie stillness. In the distance, on the ramparts burned the light of thousand upon thousand of torchlights. The sky resounded with the enemy's loud unremitting cries of

victory. Leaning on his hands Janakiram raised himself with great difficulty and gazing towards that Fort, the nest of all his love and hope, his two eyes suddenly filled with tears. Wiping away the trickle of blood from his forehead with his right hand, he looked behind him and saw that there was not a soul to be seen anywhere, only a few jackals were hunting around for prey

At the very same hour, gazing from one of the windows of the Fort, Malatimala felt suddenly afraid. Was it then all over? A deep silence also had descended over the vanquished palace. A pale-faced maid-servant came and stood beside her. Malatimala turned her big black eyes upon her and asked, "Everything over?"

News came that the secret door had been thrown open, the people of the household were all departing, the maid called Malatimala to go with them, but she replied, "Let the peacock barge be got ready."

No one could understand what she meant, for the enemy was prowling all around the river ghat, who could elude their searching eyes and escape by way of the river?

Malatimala explained, "No, not the river ghat. I ordered the peacock barge to be ready on the pond. Go and find out if it is so—"

All the flowers which had bloomed that evening on the golden Champa trees in the Raja's garden were picked and brought to her. Malatimala put some of them in her coiled hair and the rest she took folded in her

saree. She put on her favourite pearl earrings; reddened her feet with lac; painted a line of vermilion on the parting of her hair. Then she went inside the peacock barge which held memories of so many beautiful nights of love.

The boat floated a long distance away. The victors had entered the Fort. Flying red banners they marched by the pond and entered the empty palace; all the inmates of the palace had escaped by the secret door!

The light of twenty or twenty-five torches were reflected on the waters of the pond. "Catch that boat, catch it—" they cried.

Malatimala turned the small plank at the bottom of the boat. Gradually it sank beneath the waters of the pond, till even its long mast disappeared. No one could catch up with it, only through some chink of the sunken boat floated up some of the Champa flowers which had been gathered in Malatimala's lap—

Gradually the night became deeper and the moon sank down behind the high towers of the Fort. Only a few stars gazed down on the vanquished broken-kneed Janakiram who lay on his bed of dust. Just then somebody creeped in through the darkness and helped up the prince and called him, "Let us go, master."

"Where?"

"To the banyan tree. I've kept a horse waiting underneath it. I'll take you away on horseback."

"And the others in the Fort?"

The faithful servant told him of all that had happened in the Fort and ended his tale by saying, "There is no sign left of her except the golden Champa flowers floating on the waters."

"Where?" Janakiram asked, and put out his hand, "You couldn't bring some for me? Can you put me on the horse? Do be so kind as to put me on it—I'll go only to bring one flower—"

He did not pay heed to anything. With a clatter of hooves the horse ran northwards at the pace of wind through the darkness. In the moat on the slopes where the corn grows today, there Janakiram was found lying dead next morning. The horse had disappeared.

From that time, it is said, a strange thing happens every night. At midnight when the constellation of the Seven Sages (the Great Bear) reaches mid-heaven, and the silence becomes still deeper in the adjoining villages; at that hour, inside the lonely forest, the prince's bride of four hundred years ago comes out of her ice-cold bed in the depths of the Panka Dighi. She pushes aside the thorn bushes which grow on the broken ghat and comes forward tiptoeing carefully; yet, the jingling sound of her anklet-bells mingles with the monotonous chirping of crickets. Her lovely face decorated with white sandalwood; on the parting of her hair the line of vermilion painted four centuries ago; her feet red with lac; her brocade bodice and cloud-blue sarree drip water and soak the earth of the forest. When she comes to its edge,

she rests her body against the trunk of a mango tree and stares at the northern field.

Again in the rains when that moat becomes filled to the brim with water, and the horse is unable to cross it and to reach the edge of the forest, during those months Malatimala comes out into the open field. On the dew-drenched mud-banks by the side of the fragrant cornfields one can see faint imprints in red of Malatimala's tiny lac-painted feet; the peasants who come to work in the fields before dawn see these traces of her feet, which fade away with sunrise.

Shanker threw away the end of his cigar and got up. On the other side of the field where the shoemakers lived—their thatched huts, their newly-built barns full of corn—all were peacefully asleep. Shanker felt that the forest which he had seen in the afternoon had now become imbued with a strange beauty and enchantment in the night's white moonlight. There, the bride of a forgotten age now stood waiting, and her hero was rushing towards her on horse-back at the speed of an arrow—nothing seemed unbelievable at this hour! He felt that the forest which he had seen so still and inanimate in the evening, at this hour it had changed its guise. One among the many mysteries which man had been unable to fathom with all his knowledge, now revealed itself in all the beauty of its strange music, there in the forest.

At the same moment, Sudharani rose up in his mind—the things she said to him, the way she laughed, got

annoyed and hurt him—he remembered every little detail of their life together and his eyes filled with tears. She would never come back again to him as a clear, definite reality, in the moments when he was wide awake, and brooding thus, he became obsessed with a strange unreasoning delusion. He felt that Sudharani—her sweet gaze, her laughter, every beat of her little heart was not lost to this universe, she was still alive somewhere beyond the reach of mortals.

Perhaps he would find her in places like that wild lonely forest at this hour of the night; it would be worth while going to seek her. Shanker went on brooding, why only Malatimala and Sudharani, all the people who had died since the beginning of creation; all the waves of laughter and tears which had flowed; all the blossoms which had bloomed and perished; all the beautiful nights which have come and gone; every one of them is hidden somewhere, beyond the light of today. When man pauses for a moment to be engrossed in his memories, immediately they come out of their secret places and tiptoe into his mind. Sudharani too often leaves her secret refuge and comes to him in his dreams; sits by his side, caresses him, but melts into the air as soon as he wakes up.

The horse was tied to one of the streamers of the banyan tree, which was acting as the stable; Shanker saddled the horse himself and like a man in a dream he got on it and galloped away. He looked with pity towards the

sleeping village and said to himself: Fools! Your eyes only saw the big Jack-fruit trees, and you only think of how to make a little money by cutting them down and selling their planks. So you are fighting law-suits; despite having lived so long by the forest, you never once cared to look for those who have endowed beauty and mystery to that tangle of mango and Jack-fruit trees, thorn bushes, reeds, flowering creepers and shrubs; whose light has illuminated the dark waters of the Panka Dighi!

The horse crossed the moat and stood before the forest. Shanker tied its reins to a tree and began walking along the road which Bhajahari had cleared out of the jungle. Two huge Sirish trees stood on both sides of the entrance to the forest. When he had been talking to Bhajahari he had not noticed them. He felt that these were the lion-gateways of the mysterious dream palace! He stood there for a while gazing at the shadow-spattered forest. He felt confident that before this night turned into morning, he would be able to solve the mystery of the 'land beyond death' in this forest. Those who were born long before us, and who enjoyed this beautiful earth before us, here inside this dark forest they had hidden themselves with their strange manners and customs, their heroism, their riches, their loves and hates. Standing before this gateway if someone beckoned

the men and women of another age, they would perhaps lift the curtain of forgetfulness and peer out.

The crackling of dry branches under his careless feet sounded like a cry of pain uttered by the forest itself. As if unseen sentries were issuing a wordless command: "Take off your shoes!"

Dry leaves were rustling as if countless people were moving to and fro, his eyes could not see them because Shanker had come from the moonlight into darkness. Curious, restless and eager—he quickly brought out a torch from his pocket.

He turned the rays of the torch in all directions, but the forest was utterly empty! He could hardly believe it. Again and again, he looked all around him. Another day suddenly came to his mind. It was at noon, a few days after his marriage, Sudharani and her companions had stolen his favourite pack of cards and had sat down to a game; he had been invited to another village and was not expected to return before evening. But for some reason or other he had not gone. From outside he heard the card players talking and laughing, but before he entered the room everyone had vanished, only the pack of cards lay scattered on the bed.

In the light of the torch he walked carefully through the thorn bushes and reached the steps leading to the pond and sat down there. The water shimmered in the moonlight. He put out his torch and sat in silence for a long time.

Gradually the moon began going down towards the West. Not a sound could be heard, yet he felt that the forest-dwellers were getting impatient. Every night at this hour they had certain important rituals to perform, nothing could be done as long as Shanker was there. They were all waiting in silence for him to go away.

Suddenly from somewhere a breeze sprang up. In a moment the forest began murmuring and became full of activity, as if the guests had already arrived, yet nothing was arranged. There was great noise and confusion, the night seemed to be rushing around on thousands of feet; pale rays of moonlight glistened through the leaves—like shining lance-heads of the army accompanying the great ones. The silent ones pointed their fingers at Shanker and looked at each other's face saying: "Who is he? From where does he come? We don't know him!"

Listening with all his being Shanker felt, from below the pond he could hear a woman weeping as if her heart would break, her pain and sorrow was borne on the wind all around him. The dark ghost-like trees seemed to be making signs to her to say: "Everything will get known. Stop your crying." But the sobbing did not stop.

In the depths of the water inside the four-hundred-year-old peacock barge the charming princess waits the whole day long holding her breath; at night she throws off her veil and comes to join the nightly festival; tonight she beats her head against the last step below the water and weeps in mute anguish.

Then the moon went down and the waters of the pond became dark once again. The breeze fell, and not a leaf stirred but her weeping did not cease. It seemed as if the hosts of the night's festival had become impatient and were hastily screening off everything with darkness. They seemed to say—let Shanker sit there if he so wished, but they would not let him see anything.

Shanker lit his torch and turned its light in all directions, everyone had disappeared, there was nothing anywhere.

Shanker got up and said to himself, "I am going away, don't weep. Oh, shy bashful princess! Let your body blossom like a lotus on the waters of the pond, I will not look at you. The dark night, the undiscovered land, the secret mountain cave, the deep forest—all this is yours. Forgive me for the inconvenience I have caused you, and for having made you weep, sitting here without any right in your kingdom."

While he was going away he thought he need not have come here to bother the unknown ones, to make the princess weep and then take his farewell, all for this little space of time. But was this all? Had he not come here to give them much more trouble? When his survey was over and the dispute about ownership of this forest settled, someone would cut down the forest to reap money. Men seem to be unable to find space enough for themselves in the many towns, villages, fields and rivers they already possess. They seem determined not to leave even

one inch of land unpossessed. So they sent Shanker as their general with his army of clerks, files and survey instruments, to invade the quiet lonely territory where the unknown ones dwelled for hundreds of years. Shanker remembered how Bhajahari had laughed showing his big white teeth, that laugh was as cruel and menacing as a sharp polished dagger. He had said, "Have we not caused enough trouble? Morning, noon and evening, with compass and chains on our shoulders, we are always prowling around!"

The trees overhead seemed to frown and say: "You think that you will be able to do that? It is no use declaring war against us. From the beginning of time you have been fighting us, clearing jungles and making further inroads into our domain. But we too are tracking your footsteps. While you build new homes in forest clearings, we will swallow up your old homes."

A flock of bats flew towards the village with a whirr of wings beating against the sky. The sound of their wings seemed to echo the mocking laughter of the forest.

Shanker came out of the forest, got up on his horse and slowly walked him back. In the forest behind him, on the branch of every tree glowed flocks of glow-worms; from there came the soft thud of falling mango buds, the scent of strange flowers. Again and again he turned round and looked back. Somewhere far away in the distance a dog barked. An 'akash pradip' (a lamp lit on the top of a high pole) in somebody's house was

burning in competition with the stars in the sky.

Now he will go to his tent, lie on his camp-bed and sleep. But if Sudharani comes now into this dark field and stands before him with the vermilion mark burning like a flame on her forehead, and her hair flowing down her back; if she comes on tiptoe now, smiling mischievously and holding the horse's reins she gazes at him with wide open eyes, there will only be the starlit sky overhead, no one to see them. Shanker would jump off his horse, catch hold of her hand and say in harsh tones—yes, but what will he say to her? No, he will only ask of her: “What wrong have I done you?”

Suddenly the horse jumped over a mud-bank and Shanker realised that he had not yet crossed the moat—his horse was circling the forest round and round over the cornfields. He kicked the horse hard and it burst into a tremendous speed, but the moat seemed to be without any end. The further he went, he still remained in the tangle of corn stubble, his sense of direction was completely lost.

Shanker felt he was being punished by the forest folk, because he had gone to poke fun at them, so they had bound him, horse and all, to the cornfields; he would have to go on circling there; there was no escape for him, he would not be able to get out of the moat and reach the open field until the night was over.

He suddenly felt obstinate and urged his horse to run faster and still faster, till it raced at the speed of light-

ning. He thought that thus would he tear away those unseen chains with which they bound him. He came upon a high mud-bank which he had not seen in the darkness, his horse stumbled and fell with him. Shanker felt that someone dragged him by his hair from the horse and dashed him against the mud-bank. With a terrible moan he rolled down into the moat. The horse took fright and trampling over Shanker, it climbed up into the fields and bolted, clip-clop, clip-clop—its hoof-beats rang against the dry earth.

It was the last hour of darkness and the morning star blazed in the sky. Lying semi-conscious on the spot where four hundred years ago Janakiram lay dead, Shanker felt that the very same Janakiram had come from somewhere and snatched away his horse and ridden off to the Tayghara marshes beyond the river. The sound of hoof-beats gradually receded and faded into the dark distance.



PREMENDRA MITRA



P U N N A M
OR
The Son—The Future

THE ILLNESS COULD NOT BE REMEDIED.

When the cough and cold got well the entire body became covered with sores, then the liver swelled up, after which jaundice began. It seemed as if there was a tug-of-war over the four-year-old boy between man and the god of death. His hands and feet were thin and wobbly as reeds, only his sad helpless eyes burned in his pale, yellow face; those eyes seemed to be filled with all the tiredness, lethargy and disgust in the world.

Those were not the eyes of a child, it seemed that an old man who had tasted all the bitterness of life had taken refuge there. Only the helpless sadness in those eyes was that of a child.

All day long he would cry and make unreasonable demands. Chobi too at times could not stand it. Suddenly she slapped him on the back and cried, "Die! Why don't you die and give me peace!"

The child's shrieks rose still higher and pierced the sky. On the next bed Lalit turned round once, tossed restlessly for a while but did not say anything. He had scolded his wife so many times. This had caused many quarrels also, but nowadays he did not have the heart to say anything. He realised what lay behind Chobi's sudden impatience—what terrible sadness, despair and weariness! Still, his heart throbbed with pain.

But there is no help for it. He is just a petty clerk who looks after the loading and unloading of goods at the docks. He makes a little money when ships come into

the docks, otherwise there is no help for doing anything except just sitting. His income is not enough to pay off even the grocer's debt, let alone the doctor. But in spite of this, he has omitted nothing.

The child's shrieks burst into the sky, continuous and incessant. The shrieks are not of pain but are only a revolt against the whole world. Chobi feels remorseful after having hit him in a sudden fit of temper. She looks towards her husband's bed in fear and tries to find out whether his sleep is being disturbed. Exhausted with the whole day's work, her eyes become heavy with sleep and weariness, but the child will not stop screaming. He wants neither petting nor toys nor food; it was a limitless hatred against everything in his mind which welled up in the shape of tears. They were not tears but curses hurled against the universe.

Lalit lies thinking in bed pretending to sleep. He does not think of the blind cruelty of life, neither of his terrible frustration; he does not try to solve any great problem of philosophy. He only thinks: the doctor said that it will not do unless he takes the child away for a change, but how will it be possible? He listens to Chobi, how anxiously she pets the child and tries to coax him, to divert his attention. She says, "Good boy, don't cry. Tomorrow I'll buy you a red motor car; you'll sit in it and drive the car." The child goes on screaming monotonously: "Why did you hit me?"

Chobi again fondles him and tries to take him in her

lap and says, "Listen, you'll sit in the car and blow the horn." The child kicks and throws his hands about, pushes his mother away and continues shrieking in the same monotonous voice: "Why did you hit me?"

Suddenly the whole affair strikes Lalit as terribly funny! An adult mind disguising itself as a child's, just to divert a child's attention and the child's stupid selfishness; could there be anything more ridiculous than this? The next moment he feels ashamed of his thought. In the light of the lantern he sees Chobi's worn-out pale face; her sad sleepless eyes. He feels angry with himself for his mind's unseemly behaviour. He turns his back on them, stares aimlessly at the wall in front of him and begins to brood again over meaningless worries. No, he has committed no wrong in marrying. Has he? No, never!

He had lived as a dependent in his brother-in-law's home, so after very little schooling he had to find a job in order to pay off the debt to his brother-in-law for the shelter he had given. Lalit had decided that he would not marry, nor was anyone very anxious about getting him married either. Even when he had passed the age when men in Bengal usually marry, his resolution not to marry had remained intact, though he could not say that it was unshaken. A terrible dissatisfaction filled his mind and pricked him night and day. Marriage, a full life, a woman's company, the joy of having a home of his own—his mind ached with an unrealised hunger for all this.

He never felt elated with the pride of confirmed bachelorhood. Vaguely, but constantly, he felt that this lonely life was useless, crippled. It was not that he had not pondered over the question of poverty, but his mind always revolted against making poverty, which was created by man, a reason for frustrating his life.

In between his thoughts he heard the same obstinate screaming of his child: "Why did you hit me?"

But where could he take him for a change! Lalit thought of many possible and impossible places. Besides, for that he needed money. Chobi's ornaments had all gone; all that remained was a pair of gold bangles. Lest these got worn out if she wore them constantly, she had put them away. Besides, what price could those bangles fetch? At the most a hundred rupees! With that where could he take them for a change and how long could they stay there?

But nothing made the child stop screaming. Lalit suddenly sat up. Chobi was absolutely exhausted and nodding in between the screams. When she heard Lalit get up, with a start she became wide awake and gave a hard slap on the child's back, saying, "There you are! Now you've waked up everybody! From where did such a demon come to my womb?"

Lalit felt really hurt this time, "Oh! Why did you hit him again?"

"No! I mustn't hit him, indeed! The whole night he goes on screaming as if dacoits have come to the house

and wakes up the whole neighbourhood!"

"He has become irritable because of his illness," says Lalit and tries to take the child in his arms. But the child refuses to come to him. He catches hold of Chobi's saree in his fist and screams still louder.

Chobi snatches away her saree and gets up, "Why doesn't he die? It would be a great relief if he died."

"Really, Chobi, what are you saying?"

Now Chobi bursts into tears and in a voice choked with sobs, says, "What am I to say! Do you think that I don't know that he hasn't come to live? He will only suffer, make us suffer till our bones must turn to ashes and then die!"

Chobi turns her back towards Lalit and wipes her eyes with her saree.

The child puts out his thin, bloodless arms from Lalit's lap, says, "I want to go to mother," and goes on screaming incessantly.

"But the doctor said that once we took him for a change he would get well." The manner in which Lalit speaks does not carry much conviction. He has lost hope himself.

Chobi does not say anything. She picks up the child from her husband's lap and forces him to lie on his bed and says, "Shut up, if you scream again I'll open the door and throw you out into the streets." Then she lies down near the child and tells her husband, "Why don't you go and lie down? What is the good of keeping awake

like this? The whole day you worked in office and the whole night you aren't able to shut your eyes because of this child! Do you think your health can stand it?"

Lalit goes and lies down in his bed and says, "But you, you didn't get even a little sleep."

"But I'm lying down; I'll go to sleep now."

But she does not get any sleep. The child makes a new demand now. He points to a special place, says, "Why do you lie down? Sit here." Chobi will have to sit in the place he indicates. She pets him, scolds him, begs him and says, "Good boy, I am very sleepy; let me lie down a little. All right, I'll lie here, are you pleased?" But that is not enough. It is not enough for her to lie down there. She will have to sit. The child goes on: "Why do you lie down? You must sit here."

Lalit feels this to be unbearable. He gets up and says, "Shall I take him out for a walk on the road for a little while?"

Chobi gets annoyed and says, "Why must you get up, can you tell me?"

"But he won't stop."

"Does that mean that you'll have to go and roam about on the streets at midnight? You lie down."

Lalit feels hopeless and once again lies down. Chobi rubs her sleepy eyes and sits where the child has told her to, just to keep him quiet.

Lalit cannot bear to look at his wife's tired, worn-out image. He lies with his back towards them and imagines

all sorts of impossible ways and means of finding the money for taking the boy for a change.

Then he dozes off. But in a little while the child's screams break into his sleep. He gets up and sees that through sheer inability to sit up any longer Chobi's head has rolled down on the bed and she is sleeping in a stiff, half-sitting posture. The child is trying to wake her up by pushing her with his legs, pulling her hands and howling loudly: "Why did you lie down? Sit up here!"

Day after day, night after night pass like this! A big room with a tin roof, a narrow strip of a courtyard and a tiny, thatched kitchen; their household revolves round this. Beside the water tap in the courtyard has sprung up a wild, nameless tree. Out of season, in winter, an abundance of unfamiliar flowers bloom on this tree which have neither any scent nor beauty. But still these flowers are its only loveliness. They are like a hopeless smile on the face of a poverty-stricken household. Yet a thin, tired stream of the age-old history of man's life flows through this little household from day to night, then from night into a new day. It continues the stream of man's super-human penance in the struggle of his daily existence, his unequalled self-sacrifice, at which perhaps even the Creator himself is surprised!

Lalit, however, makes himself think otherwise. To him vaguely all this is but a repayment of the debt he

owes for happiness received, the price to be paid for the glory of being human. Nothing more than that.

He did not expect that life would flow along as easily as a light boat—carried on a gentle current. He had thought of all this before, the trials and tribulations of life, the responsibilities of marriage.

His debt to life, however, never seems to get paid off. He cannot bear to look at Chobi these days. The bones on her cheeks and below her neck are sticking out. Hard work and worry has marked this nineteen-year-old girl's face with the tiredness of an old woman's face. Khoka, the child, is marching forward from day to day towards death.

The other day the doctor had paid a sudden visit of his own accord. Stopping his car, he had stood near the door with legs apart, two thumbs stuck into his waist-coat pockets and bending forward he had spoken in tones of mild reproach like that of a great well-wisher: "You haven't gone for a change yet! No, you won't allow this child to live, I see!"

When the doctor had gone Lalit said, "The doctor seems to be a little fond of us, have you noticed Chobi? He is not just professional with us, is he?"

They spent quite a time talking over the doctor's kindness. Lalit made up his mind he would find the money in a few days in whatever way he could.

Chobi in a more cheerful manner than usual said, "It's nearly time for the tap water to be shut off," and

went to do her work. The burden of sorrow that had been weighing on the whole household seemed suddenly to become much lighter just because of someone's momentary play-acting.

But how long did that last! Again night came. Lalit returned home tired and hopeless. The child began making his usual demands. He lay holding on to his mother's saree. He would not let her go.

"Do you think I haven't my cooking to do? As if it'll just do if I sit here like this!" Chobi tries to force him to let her go.

Moved by the child's tears Lalit says, "Let it be, I'll bring some food from the bazar. You sit near him."

"Yes! You've just come back walking four miles through rain and mud from office. Now you'll go to the bazar! There's no need to spoil the child! You've never been able to digest bazar food either."

"It won't matter just for once. You too might have some rest just for a day." Lalit begs her.

"No, no, I'm going to cook. You mustn't go to the bazar in this rain." Chobi pulls herself away. The child screams and kicks and creates a terrible row.

Lalit does not say anything more but goes out. Outside it is drizzling, the road is a mass of slimy mud; his shoes stick and sink in it. Lalit's tired feet do not seem to have energy enough to pull themselves out.

Centering round this sick child, this little household revolves silently, carrying its burden of sorrow on tired feet. Day and night everything is sacrificed to the child's blind unreasoning selfishness. Lalit thinks: "This child! He is the future man. He has the right to demand everything, no sacrifice is great enough for him."

The doctor came another day and gave a lecture, this time not in a friendly tone but patronisingly. He sat on the chair, put his hat on his lap and swinging his cane in his right hand, his left hand on his waist, turning his neck arrogantly, he said many things—about the responsibility of bringing a child into the world, the duty towards the future generation, etc.

Even when he was going, he stuck his face out from the car and said, "People who bring a human being into this world just for the sake of their own pleasure and then don't perform their duty to that child, such people should be sent to prison. Tell me, shouldn't they be sent to prison?"

Lalit goes to his office and comes back just as usual but his face has turned hard like a face made of stone. Who knows what secret resolve has been born in his mind—unknown even to himself.

The child is getting better, is clearly getting well. Lalit sits on a deck chair in the open verandah and watches the child play. Chobi stands behind the chair and says,

“What a lovely place! I don’t feel like ever going back to Calcutta.” Then she bends down and with a face bright with joy she whispers into Lalit’s ear, “Do you know, my two arms ached yesterday when I picked up Khoka?”

Chobi’s cheeks seemed to have taken on a tinge of the red colour of the earth of this land; her body seemed to shimmer with the liveliness of the teak forest around her. Lalit turned his face and looked at her once and then seemed to silently brood over something.

A little while later Chobi cries out loudly, “Khoka, let him go! You’ll hurt him.” Khoka is sitting on the back of his companion and trying hard to knock the boy’s head on the ground.

Lalit has to get up to part them. The other child who gets up with his head covered with dust, however, does not cry. With a sad smile he says sweetly, “Just see, uncle, how can I take him on my back?”

Unknowingly Lalit compares his own child with this lovely sweet-voiced child of his neighbour and suddenly without any reason he feels a terrible pain in his heart.

The child is thin, but his head is covered with a mass of long silky hair and a sad smile always lingers in his two blue eyes and tiny face. Lalit takes his son by the ear and scolds, “Why were you trying to bang his head on the ground? Can’t you stop quarrelling?”

Khoka remains silent but his face is red and glum. The other boy quickly comes forward and says, “No,

no, we haven't quarrelled. We were playing horses. I couldn't carry him on my back, that's why he knocked my head once on the ground. I didn't get hurt."

"You must never hit him again!" Lalit scolds Khoka once more, then goes back and sits down again in the verandah. Chobi says, "Their Tunu can't cope with our Khoka," then seeing Lalit's grave face, she becomes silent.

But Khoka and Tunu's game is spoilt. Khoka overlooks all of Tunu's coaxing, requests and begging; he sits sulking with a surly face. Then suddenly without any provocation he pinches Tunu hard and runs away. Tunu cries out. Chobi goes quickly, picks him up in her arms and begins scolding her son. Only Lalit does not get up from the chair, his face becomes dark with sudden pain. After quietening down, Tunu comes to him a little later and says, "Uncle, Khoka hit me, so I won't come to play again." Even then Lalit does not speak. He stares in front of him and only he knows what he is thinking about.

But Tunu came again in the afternoon. Lalit was then trying to teach his son; after labouring for over half an hour he had become hopeless because he could not make his son write on his slate anything which had even the slightest resemblance to any letter of the alphabet. Tunu came and sat quietly on one side. Lalit asked, "Can you write 'A,' Tunu?"

Tunu's face lit up with a wide smile, he said, "Yes,

uncle, I can. I can also take dictation from my lesson book—'Bodhodaya.' Shall I write, uncle?"

Lalit asked in surprise, "You read 'Bodhodaya'?"

"I've finished my first book. Shall I write 'A' and show you, uncle?" Eagerly Tunu stretched out his hand towards the slate. But Khoka would not give it to him and kept the slate clutched in his two fists.

"Uncle, please ask him to give me his slate," Tunu begged. "I'll show him how to write 'A' very nicely."

Suddenly Lalit said in a hard voice, "No, let it be, you needn't write. He is doing his lessons now, you go home." The unexpected harshness in Lalit's voice frightened Tunu, his face turned small and slowly he went away.

But Lalit could not bear to sit any longer. As soon as Tunu went away, he went out of the room with a grave face. He met Chobi who asked, "The lessons are over so quickly today? The way you go on about it, I don't suppose you'll rest till you've made the boy a judge or a magistrate!"

Lalit only said gravely, "Yes."

For two days Tunu did not come. There was no end to the shame and remorse which Lalit felt. He had started for Tunu's house with Khoka, but had turned back from half way. He felt as if his head was bowed with shame before himself for ever.

Next morning suddenly he saw Tunu near the gate and with a start he called out, "Tunu!" Tunu was

standing near the gate and eagerly gazing inside. Seeing Lalit he was going away in a frightened, embarrassed manner. "Tunu, why don't you come to play with Khoka?" asked Lalit. Feeling a little reassured by this kindly greeting Tunu said diffidently, "Then you won't scold me, uncle?"

Without any reason whatsoever Lalit's eyes filled with tears. There was something so gentle and sad about everything this fragile flower-like boy said and did. Quickly Lalit picked him up in his arms, kissed him on his forehead and said, "No, my son, why should I scold you!"

Tunu's face became bright with laughter, he said, "I'll go and play then!"

Lalit put him down and said, "Go." Tunu went off running happily. After two days for the first time Lalit went for a walk with an easy mind. When he came back, however, his mental ease no longer remained. From the door he heard Khoka's shrill angry voice, "No, you shan't give him two, mother! Why can't he go and eat in his own house? Greedy glutton!"

Lalit turned red with shame, pain and anger; wondering from where such hideous jealousy could have entered this little child's mind, he went into his room. From there he heard Chobi trying to coax him, "No, darling, you mustn't be so jealous. He is your brother, let him have two and you eat two."

Tunu's sweet voice was heard, "I won't take two

are sacrificing so much, understand?"

"Go away, I don't like your silly talk," with that Chobi pulled away her saree and went away.

Lalit sat in the darkness and perhaps tried to catch a glimpse of that future with the help of his imagination.

A few days later suddenly Chobi woke up at midnight hearing a sound of loud wailing; she woke Lalit and asked, "Do you hear?"

Lalit said, "Yes."

With a pale, frightened face Chobi said, "The sound of wailing is coming from Tunu's house, isn't it?"

"It seems so."

"Yesterday his condition was terribly serious, perhaps he has died." Chobi wiped her eyes.

Lalit got up from his bed, went and stood near the window. After pacing the room for some time he suddenly stood still and in a distorted voice said, "Tunu died and our son got well, isn't it strange, Chobi?"

A shiver passed over Chobi but she did not give any reply. Lalit continued pacing the room and went on saying, "We've sacrificed a lot, we've put up with a lot, our child must live, Chobi! Millions and millions of sons like ours will live in this world, will grow up, be jealous, fight, kill and keep the world hot with sound and fury. Otherwise, our striving, our suffering would become futile, Chobi!" His voice sounded unnatural.

Chobi got annoyed and said, "You've gone off your head!"

"Perhaps." With that he caught hold of Chobi's hand, pressed it hard and said in a harsh voice, "Do you know how I got the money for coming for a change, Chobi? Do you know what the responsibility for bringing a child into this world has driven me to?"

Seeing the look on his face Chobi now got very frightened and asked, "What?"

"I've stolen, I've cheated, I've sold bundles of goods from ships. But in meeting the demands of the future man surely I could have done no wrong?"

"Then what's going to happen?" Chobi's voice was trembling in fear.

Lalit laughed bitterly and said, "Nothing will happen. There's nothing to be frightened about. That's the funny thing! This theft will never be detected. Only it will prick my mind for ever!"

Lalit's sudden excitement, however, left him with as great a speed as it had come. He opened the door and went out into the verandah. After standing silently for some time in the soothing, cool darkness, he felt perhaps there was no reason for him to get so upset and agitated after all.

The wide expanse of heaven seemed athrill with the light of stars. Standing there he remembered that through the aeons and aeons of her existence, this dumb, all-suffering earth had again and again been disappointed in her hopes, been frustrated, yet she had not lost patience for hoping and waiting even to this day!

SAILAJANANDA MUKHERJEE



ATI GHARANTI NA PAI GHAR
OR

The Home-Bird Never Finds a Home

out quickly, but in her hurry she had forgotten to veil her head. But what wonderful eyes the mother-in-law had! The moment she saw her, she cried out, "The wretched girl dies with pride because of her hair!"

The daughter-in-law bit her tongue and quickly veiled her head. Tapy's mother remarked, "No, madam, no! She's proud because your Harish loves her!"

Harish's mother did not believe it, with a grimace she said, "Don't talk rubbish! They've been married for ten years now and she has neither a son nor a daughter. Pour ashes on such love!"

"That's true," said Tapy's mother. "Unless there are children a house is empty."

"What can I say, sister, it's just my luck," with that Mokshoda pointed to her forehead.

"Have you given her an amulet of the Snake Goddess Manasha?"

"Nothing has been left undone, sister."

Tapy's mother seemed to think over something, then looked at the daughter-in-law's face once and said, "No, she hasn't passed the age for having children. She will have children. I didn't have to do all that for my Narayani. She has only four children and now she says: 'No mother, those who have no children are happy.' I laughed and told her—go and see our Mokshoda's daughter-in-law. She is beating her head to have a child."

On one side Tapy's mother and on the other the mother-in-law, in between them, the daughter-in-law

stood holding the letter with her head bowed. She had already read the letter from beginning to end; when she was going to read it again she found that it was a letter written two or three months ago!

The daughter-in-law could not even sit down. The fire in the kitchen was alight by that time; she put on the water for boiling the dhal and sat down to cut up vegetables—her wet hair spread out on her back. Suddenly she heard the mother-in-law's voice in the courtyard. The girl saw that she had picked up the pile of clean utensils and was going towards the pond in the rain, crying, "I wish I could die! But has that wretched God of Death any sense?"

Slowly veiling her head the daughter-in-law asked in fear, "What's happened mother?"

Mokshoda replied angrily, "Happened, my head!" She went forward two steps and continued, "Are you going to dry your hair or clean the utensils? Two things can't be done at the same time! I thought, how much can that poor girl do by herself, so I'd put away the utensils; and when I was doing so, I found they were dirty. Now I must go to clean them all over again."

The mother-in-law really opened the back door and went off to the pond. After a little while she came back, changed her clothes and as she was going to put them out to dry, she cried out, "Look at the way she spreads

the clothes to dry. This saree would have caught on the wire and got torn just now. But what do you care if it's torn? Since you've bewitched the man who provides food and clothes, what have you got to worry about!"

The daughter-in-law's eyes filled with tears. Rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand she thought—God had just sent her to weep and her life was spent in weeping.

Sushama was caught absolutely red-handed that day. It was drizzling, but let it rain, it was not so bad to get wet, as to lose one's caste by using dirty utensils. Mokshoda had gone to the pond early in the morning. She was returning with a pile of kitchen-utensils, murmuring away to herself. Suddenly her eyes fell on the front door. She saw Suku, the goldsmith, standing with an umbrella and a wooden box in his hand. She asked, "Hello Suku! Whom are you looking for?"

Suku answered, "Bowma." (Daughter-in-law).

"Bowma, why?"

"I've some business with her."

The answer was not very pleasing. Mokshoda went forward and asked, "What's the business, Suku?"

"Well, a pair of bangles."

"Bangles?" The mother-in-law was absolutely surprised. "Whose bangles?"

Suku said, "Bowma had ordered them."

Mokshoda kept silent for a few moments and said, "Where, let me see the bangles. Come in."

Suku followed her to the verandah. Mokshoda went inside the room to put away the utensils.

Sushama knew nothing. That morning she had got up late. When she came to the last step of the staircase, she saw Suku standing there with his umbrella folded. Seeing him Sushama veiled her head and bit her tongue, "Oh, my goodness! Did I ask you to—"

The daughter-in-law had thought that perhaps her mother-in-law was still at the pond. But she could not finish what she was going to say. To her surprise her mother-in-law came out in the midst of it, and said, "I told him to come here myself, daughter. If I've done any wrong, I beg your pardon."

Sushama bent her head and pricked the ground with one toe.

Mokshoda asked, "Let me see, Suku, how you've made the bangles, how many pairs have you made, and with how much gold?"

Suku laughed. He sat down there on his haunches and brought out something really very tiny folded in a thin blue paper. Neither a 'Bala' (heavy bangle) nor any expensive ornament, but just a pair of thin gold bangles for the hands of a tiny child.

Looking at the daughter-in-law's face Suku said, "Now look, I've made them as you had told me, they'll look lovely on Sonamoni's hands."

Sushama put out her hands and took the two bangles silently, then with her head bowed, she said, "You go now." Suku understood the indication. He slowly picked up his umbrella, saluted both of them and went away.

Mokshoda asked, "Is Sonamoni the name of that son of Chapala's?"

Sushama replied, "Yes." She was going to put away the pair of bangles when the mother-in-law called out, "Listen."

Sushama had gone near the staircase, she stopped short and turned round. Mokshoda said, "I had written to Harish: 'Send money, I want to buy the year's supply of molasses.' He replied that he was very short of money. I thought that perhaps it was so. He came here himself, I told him that potatoes became expensive during the rains, perhaps even three or four annas a seer, it would be much better if he would buy some for us now. He said, 'I have no money.' Well, did he say all that himself or do you teach him to say those things?" She looked at the daughter-in-law's face for an answer, but as it was very difficult to reply to such things, she kept quiet.

The mother-in-law said in honeyed tones, "What else can I say, child? People, whose husbands haven't got a penny, how do their wives go about doing charity?"

Sushama could not keep quiet any longer. She suddenly said angrily, "Your son didn't give me money, mother. I gave that money myself. I had a little gold

of my own and had the bangles made with that."

Mokshoda said, "Why should you give it away, daughter? Do you think you've said something worth while? At the time of my nephew's rice-giving ceremony you were here, but still, I couldn't give him anything. My nephew, your husband's own cousin, but who is he to you? You made friends out of neighbourliness, that's good, but why all this? I don't like these excesses! It's happening sitting in my house, in front of my eyes, that's why I say all this; otherwise you can do just as you please. Die; give away everything with both hands, what's that to me?"

The advice was not so very bad but the daughter-in-law suddenly spoke out, "I'll give what I choose."

A mother-in-law, the mistress of the house, the person to be respected—to dare answer back to her face! It was natural that Mokshoda got angry. Her eyes opened wide with anger. She said, "You will give! You dare say so? But if you do I curse that you'll eat the child's head and bathe in his blood." With this she went away from there.

The two friends met every day at the bathing-ghat at Mondal Pukur (Mondal's pond). Sushama came to fill her pitcher, Chapala to wash clothes. That evening Sushama could not do her hair. She went out just coiling it up loosely. When she had crossed the

paddy fields, she saw Chapala standing beneath the small neem tree, a pitcher resting on her hips, and no child in her arms. Sushama asked, "Where is Sona?"

Chapala replied, "My sister-in-law took him away."

Sushama remained silent for a while and then said, "You didn't send him in the morning too."

"Khendi didn't take him, dear. She said it was raining and she wouldn't go." Sushama remained silent. Chapala asked, "Well, I heard that you are going to, Calcutta."

Sushama fell from the sky hearing this. Her husband, of course, had proposed several times that he would rent a house in Calcutta, but she had never spoken of this to anyone. She asked, "Tell me, where did you hear this?"

With a strange expression on her face Chapala answered, "Where am I to hear it from? I heard from your mother-in-law!"

"From my mother-in-law?"

"Yes, I was coming home when I saw that woman—your mother-in-law—standing in front of Tapy's home and talking to Tapy's mother. I heard your name so I stood there. But can one stand and listen to them? Those two wretched women have got four eyes at the back of their heads. The moment they saw me, they became silent. I heard that your husband has written a letter, he is going to take you to Calcutta. Tell me, is it true?"

Sushama's face became unnaturally grave. She pon-

dered over something for some time, then said, "Have you filled your pitcher? Get up now."

On other days they gossiped over so many things, swam in the pond and did not come away easily from the ghat. Chapala said, "Good heavens! If I'd known you'd mind so much I wouldn't have told you."

With that she picked up her pitcher and got up to go. But she had as yet not told Sushama what she really meant to say. As soon as she climbed up the slope of the pond, Chapala said, "Let it go. They say so many things, why feel upset over it?"

Sushama went along without giving any reply. Chapala tried to say what she wanted to, so many times, but somehow she could not. She thought that perhaps Sushama herself would raise the matter, but she too was not in a frame of mind to say anything. In the end Chapala swallowed, looked at Sushama's face once, then asked, "Did the goldsmith, Suku, go to you today?"

Sushama did not know what to say. She shook her head and said, "No."

Chapala burst out laughing and said, "Go on! Suku told me that he had gone and delivered them."

—This time Sushama really got into a difficulty. She said, "Yes, he has delivered them, but forgive me, I can't give them."

Chapala did not believe her. She said, "He has made them badly, has he? But it doesn't matter. Later on, you can ~~give~~ another good pair."

Sushama said, "No, really my means are not such that I can give gold ornaments as presents. I shan't be able to give those bangles."

This time there was nothing to disbelieve. Chapala sighed and said with a disappointed look at Sushama, "But why? What's happened to you." Sushama did not say anything. Chapala continued, "Then you shouldn't give people such hopes."

Sushama still remained silent.

That day, they had not delayed at the bathing-ghat as they did on other days, yet the mother-in-law said, "You had gone when there was sunlight and you've come back in moonlight. Who knows what you find to talk so much about every day!"

Sushama did not pay any heed to this. Spreading out her wet saree to dry in the courtyard, she said, "Where, mother, give me my letter."

The mother-in-law was going away from there as if she had not heard anything. The daughter-in-law said again, "My letter?"

"Letter?" The mother-in-law seemed to have dropped from the sky. "What letter, daughter? Whose letter? Why? Where?"

In her anger Sushama was going to shout, 'Don't pretend,' but controlled herself and said, "You've opened it, read it, very well, but give me my letter."

"Oh my goodness! What is she saying?" With this Mokshoda was going to sit down right there with her hand on her cheeks, but suddenly she thought of something and she could not manage to do so. She cried, "Wait, let me call Tapy's mother. In the end, this also was in store for me? Today she says I've torn her letter; tomorrow she'll say that I've stolen her ornaments; then one day perhaps she'll catch hold of me and give me a beating. No daughter, I don't want this kind of happiness. Let Harish come, let him take away his wife and live happily with her. Otherwise it's better that I should go away somewhere." Then Mokshoda went out, perhaps really to call Tapy's mother.

Sushama neither lit the kitchen fire, nor did she make any preparation for cooking. After placing the evening lamp below the Tulsi bush, she began pacing the courtyard in the dim moonlight of eventide. Let her mother-in-law come back, she was not going to rest without getting to the bottom of this. But she did not have to do anything much. Seeing her mother-in-law was delaying, as soon as Sushama lit the lantern and went into the kitchen, a ten-year-old boy came running to her. He brought out a letter from underneath his clothes and said, "Here you are." In the beginning, Sushama did not understand what it was all about, then she saw that the letter was addressed to her. She asked, "Who gave this letter?"

The boy got a little flabbergasted and said, "The Peon."

Sushama realised everything, still she laughed and drew the boy close to her, stroked his head tenderly and said, "You mustn't tell lies. For shame! Do tell me the truth. Who gave it to you? I know."

At first the boy tried to slip away, but when he could not, he said, "Promise you won't tell anyone? Touch me and swear."

Sushama did what she was asked. Then the boy said, "Tapy's mother and your mother-in-law gave it to me. But don't tell them, they gave me four pice." With this he ran off.

Sushama saw that the letter had been closed with paste made from flour and it had not even dried. She opened the letter and read it. She saw that her husband had written things which should not be read by anyone excepting one's wife. She felt utterly ashamed and her mind became full of contempt and disrespect for that wretched old mother-in-law of hers. Towards the end of the letter her husband had written: "This time I am not lying, I have really rented a house—I will go by next Saturday night's train and bring you with me on Sunday night. You keep ready."

Today was Thursday, tomorrow Friday, and the day after—Saturday. Sushama's heart throbbed with joy. She went to light the kitchen fire, but in the end, she did not feel like doing so. She had only to cook for herself. She thought, let it be, there was no need, tonight she would manage by eating a handful of puffed rice. It was far

better to lie in bed all by herself, thinking of her new home with eyes closed, than to sit near the fire and cook for all that time.

Next morning when Sushama woke up she saw that a plate full of puffed rice, some soaked gram, a lump of molasses and a glass of water were lying near her bed. The molasses was covered with ants and the lantern was still burning. Probably her mother-in-law had handed out all this for her at night.

After the night's fast Sushama was feeling very tired. Today was Ekadashi, the eleventh day of the moon. There was no cooking to do today for her mother-in-law. She got up from bed, made up her bed and came downstairs. Then she went to clean up the cow-house. She saw that there was no cowdung there. Probably her mother-in-law herself had cleaned up the place, she had also let out the cows and calves and probably gone to bathe in the pond. Sushama thought that she would finish cooking early today and pack up her belongings in readiness for going to Calcutta.

Sushama had gone to the pond after lighting the kitchen fire. She was late in coming back. The reason for her delay was that she met the fisherwoman by the side of the pond with her net on her shoulders, she was going to catch fish from some distant pool. Her mother-in-law never bought any fish because of the handful of rice she would have to pay for it. Sushama, suddenly thought of something and called out to the fisherwoman.

The woman understood what she wanted, she said, "I've just started out. But let me see—I'll try in your pond. Today is Ekadashi, you are a married woman asking me, but you'll have to give me rice with your own hands, that mother-in-law of yours—" Without finishing what she was saying the fisherwoman smiled a little and went down into the pond.

The delay was because of that fish. After having a wash and changing her clothes, as soon as Sushama stepped into the courtyard with a few prawns and other small fish wrapped in leaves in her hand, she saw that a conference was going on. The mother-in-law had bathed and changed her clothes; Tapy had come, Tapy's mother had also come, Laxmiburi had come, also another girl—a widow—whom Sushama did not know. This girl turned round, looked at her once and remarked, "No, even now she might have one. You haven't seen my aunt. If you had seen her, you might have believed me."

Tapy's mother shook her head, pushed out her lips and said, "No child, the person on whom the amulet of the God of Gods did not work how can she . . . What do you say, Mokshoda?"

Mokshoda winked her eyes and gestured with her hands to indicate to them that the daughter-in-law had come, so she was unable to say anything now. The daughter-in-law had heard everything, understood everything, but went into the kitchen without saying a word.

She had somehow to pass only one more day, then she would be able to escape from their hands. Just one more day to get through!

She had not finished her cooking, on the other side the conference was still in full swing, when Khendi arrived with Sonamoni in her arms. Sushama did not hear them come. Suddenly startled by repeated slaps on her back and hearing a babble of "Pa-Pa, Ma-Ma," Sushama turned round and saw that Khendi was standing at a little distance after she had placed the child near her back. She had not seen Sonamoni since yesterday. The moment she turned her face to look at him, Sonamoni put his little soft white hands round Sushama's neck and burst out laughing. She did not know for how long she would not see Sonamoni after she went away to Calcutta. She felt like leaving her cooking and to go and sit with the child for a while. She wanted to put the pair of gold bangles on those two little hands and see how lovely they looked on him. But after having heard her mother-in-law's curse with her own ears how could she put that pair of bangles on his hands? Sushama felt angry with herself. Why had God given her such a cursed, helpless life?

Khendi was still standing there. Sushama said, "Why don't you take away the child, Khendi?"

Khendi laughed and replied, "No, he won't go. He has come to put on his bangles." She said this quite loud. Immediately there was a retort from the other side.

Tapy's mother said, "Just listen to the girl! Has come to put on the bangles! What's this bangle? Bangle indeed! Are they so cheap?"

With her hands on her cheek Laxmiburi cried, "What do you say—gold bangles?"

One could realise that the affair of the bangles had already been well discussed among them. This time Sushama became really angry. In her temper, she lost all sense of proportion. She pulled away Sonamoni's hands from her neck and pushed him away. She was going to say something but she could not. Her lips trembled but no words came out of her mouth.

The child practically did not know how to cry, Sushama's behaviour bewildered him so completely that he stared stupidly at her face.

Sushama turned aside and wiped her tears, took down the pan from the fire, controlled herself to some extent and said, "I'm telling you Khendi, take him away from here, otherwise I won't leave anything undone!"

Khendi practically dragged the child away and took him up in her arms. But Sushama did not move from there, she stood and just looked on. She saw Khendi was going away with the child in her arms. The child did not want to go, the more he tried to get down crying, "Ma-Ma," the more Khendi pressed him back in her arms. When they reached the door, Sonamoni turned on Khendi in despair and grabbed her hair with both hands.

It came to Sushama's mind that one day the child had bitten her nose in anger. At that time, only two of his little teeth had come out. Perhaps today also, he might bite Khendi; driven by the pain caused by his tiny sharp teeth, she too might hit him or put him down on the dust of the road and run away leaving him there.

To see whether this happened or not, Sushama crossed the courtyard, past the women sitting in judgment on her, and went upstairs. From the window she could see a portion of the road leading to Sonamoni's home. For how long did he make a fuss? She saw Sonamoni had not bitten Khendi, nor had she put him down on the road. Perhaps he had already forgotten Sushama, for he was going home laughing happily in Khendi's arms!

After getting back some degree of composure, as Sushama came down the stairs, Tapy's mother said, "Since you gave them, why by stealth, throwing it out of the window? You might have given them in front of everyone."

Though this was addressed to Sushama, she had not even looked at Tapy's mother or paid any attention to her. So she neither gave heed to this repartee nor did she give any answer. She walked across the courtyard towards the kitchen as absent-mindedly as she had been doing.

Tapy's mother called out, "Listen, madam!"

Even this time Sushama did not realise that she was being addressed. The young girl-widow was lying near

the wall with her legs stretched out. The Ekadashi fast, without either food or drink, made her face look dry and weary. She suddenly burst out, "This is very wrong of you mother. First of all, without knowing whether she has given or not . . . then the way Tapy told the story I can't believe what she said."

Mokshoda winked and nodded to indicate—of course, she had given. Then she looked towards the courtyard and said clearly, "Didn't you see that she took away the child from here. Khendi went and stood beneath the window and she threw them down through it."

Laxmiburi had been listening keenly to all this; now she said, "Yes, you are right. Gold bangles are things worth having! The moment she got it, she tucked it into her waist quickly, then ran away."

Tapy was a thin reedy girl, and could not be more than eleven or twelve years old, but she could beat an old woman in her talk. Grimacing and gesturing with her hands, Tapy cried, "Oh, no, why should I tell a lie! I didn't see Khendi take it away, but I saw Sushama throwing the ornament at her. How stealthily she dropped them through the window; the bangles were glistening; they were just like the bangles on sister's hands."

Tapy's mother said, "Can my daughter ever lie? The day she does I'll cut her into pieces and throw her into the river!" She then turned towards the kitchen and began calling again, "Sushama! Listen, oh, nawab's daughter, listen!"

Sushama was inside the kitchen. She came out and asked, "Were you calling me?"

"Yes, I'm calling you. Hearing that you've given away the gold ornament, my entrails are throbbing with pain. That's why I called you. Listen."

Sushama pulled forward her veil and came and stood near them with her head bowed down. Slowly she asked, "What are you saying?"

Tapy's mother said, "I know things like this happen when one is childless, but instead of giving the pair of gold bangles, you might have given a pair of silver anklets. In any case, even if you did give them, you needn't have thrown them out of the window like a thief. You might have done it in front of us, what's the harm if we saw it?"

Sushama was amazed.

At any rate, Harish came on Saturday night. He looked nice and well-fed. He felt hungry after walking all that distance from the station. When he sat down to eat, he called his mother and said, "Mother, I've rented a house."

Mother replied, "You've done well."

But he felt diffident about saying straight off that he was going to take his wife with him. So he said, "My health is being ruined with eating continuously in hotels."

Mokshoda answered, "Very well, why don't you take your wife with you?"

Harish did not expect that his mother would agree so easily. He thought that perhaps she was saying this in anger. He asked, "You aren't angry, are you?"

"No my son, what's there to be angry about? Neither anger nor sorrow befits people like us. For instance, your wife insulted me in front of all the people in the village yesterday. She called me a thief. She said that I opened a letter you had written to her. Where? I couldn't be angry. I had to keep my mouth shut and bear it silently. I thought, let Harish come, I'll tell him when he comes. That's best my son, don't you go and say anything to your wife."

Harish glared this way and that seeking his wife, but she could not be seen anywhere near-about. Mokshoda asked, "When have you decided to go? Tomorrow?"

Harish nodded his head and replied, "Yes."

"Just because you're taking your wife with you, don't stop coming to see me. Unless I see you sometimes I'll lock up this house one day, and I too—"

Harish laughed and said, "No, no, of course I'll come mother. And if she can't manage to run the home properly I won't keep her there for long."

His conversation with his mother ended there that night. He, of course, did not forget to ask Sushama about the quarrel over the letter, but she did not say a word and kept silent. So Harish decided the fault must be

hers. Lest he did not take her with him, Sushama admitted that the fault was hers.

When Sushama came to her new home, it was night, and she could not see everything properly. Next morning she saw that the place was not too bad. Two rooms would be quite enough for two people. She would cook in one, and the other they would use for themselves. If the windows of the big room were opened, one could see the road, and in front, there was a small park. The street was full of traffic—carriages, people and hawkers. Sushama did not feel so bad. The thing that she liked most was that, at last, she was free. She would starve with her husband, rather than go back to her mother-in-law. Let her remain in the village with Tapy's mother. Sushama would live happily here. But how could she be quite happy? Her husband went away early after having his meal. She had no companion or anyone to talk to. Alone by herself, the day never seemed to end!

She had spent all her life in the village, where it was open and green on all sides, nothing obstructed the eyes. Since coming here she only saw the big houses built with dry bricks which hid the sky. Here one did not even have the opportunity of getting pleasure from gazing out.

But her afternoons were not so bad. After changing

her clothes and doing her hair, she sat quietly near the window. All the little boys and girls of the neighbourhood ran about and played in the little park surrounded by railings. The children not old enough to run about and play came in the arms of their maid-servants who sat and gossiped after putting down their wards on the green grass. Among them there was one boy who looked exactly like Sonamoni.

Gradually evening descended, one could no longer see much. The street lights were lit quite early. The park emptied and the children returned to their homes.

It was then time for Sushama to light the kitchen fire and sit down to cook. Sitting there she thought if only she too had a son like that! She would have dressed him up and sent him to the park to play. By this time, he would have come home and called out to his mother. He would have laughed and got into her arms. She would have petted him, played with him and kissed him!

Her friend Chapala had said to her once that a girl in their village had taken some medicine and had a child when her age was thirty. That medicine could be had in Calcutta. She did not know its name and felt shy to tell her husband about it. However, she would certainly tell him today. There were many great doctors in Calcutta. There must certainly be some medicine for this!

At midday the hawkers went round with wooden

boxes full of toys, bugles, etc. They went from door to door, ringing a bell and selling toys. That day Sushama suddenly called one of them. The hawker came near the window and asked, "What do you want mother?"

Sushama did not know what to say. Her face became red with shame, but since she had called him, she said, "Show me a doll."

The hawker pulled out a huge celluloid doll and said, "This is the best I have mother, the price is two rupees." "With this he tried to push the doll through the bars in the window, but found that it was too big to be handed over like this. So he said, "I can't give this to you through the window, mother. Please send your son to take it."

Sushama looked this way and that and replied, "Let it be, give me a smaller one."

"A smaller one? But the big one was the best."

"You can give it another day—today you give that one," said Sushama pointing with her finger, but she herself did not know what she pointed at. The hawker picked up a doll, pushed it in through the window and said, "Eight annas." Perhaps he had asked a little too much, but getting what he asked for, he went away quite pleased.

But what on earth was she to do with a doll? Now Sushama felt a little ashamed of what she had done, and bending her head she began turning the doll this way and that. She put it down, then petted it, brought

it close to her face and kissed it, and then she suddenly fell asleep with the doll in her hand.

Hearing all about it Harish had laughed a lot. He drew her close to him and asked, "You want a son very badly—don't you?"

Sushama had laughed shyly and replied, "Go on! You don't even bring me a medicine!"

Next day the medicine came. It did not taste good. It was awful, one felt sick to drink it, but it did not matter. Somehow Sushama managed to swallow the medicine, closed her eyes, covered her mouth and controlled herself. She thought, let me have something, it did not matter whether it was a boy or a girl—blind or cripple. Even if it died at birth it would not matter. Still, let her not be called a barren woman any more.

Harish had gone home on Saturday. As soon as he came back on Monday morning, Sushama asked, "Did you go to Sonamoni's house?"

"I didn't get any time."

"You didn't get time?" Sushama felt very grieved. "What were you so busy about that you didn't get any time?"

"All right—next time I go—"

"No, it won't do if you just go and see him. Take a wicker cradle and those two gold bangles for him."

Harish advised her not to give the bangles. He said, "You might send a cradle but the bangles—when mother has once—" Saying this Harish paused, and thought over something, then continued, "You better give those to your own child if you have one."

Sushama looked at his face and smiled mischievously. She nodded her head and said, "All right, I'll do that. But I must have a cradle."

The cradle came and was hung from the ceiling with a long rope.

Two or three weeks later Harish said one day, "I'm going home tomorrow." He thought that perhaps he would have to take the cradle for Sonamoni with him, but Sushama said nothing about it. She only said, "Do come back on Sunday night."

Harish thought perhaps she had forgotten about the cradle. If so, it was for the best. Mother did not like this sort of thing and would probably have created a terrible fuss if he had gone with a cradle for someone else's son on his shoulders.

Harish returned on Sunday night. It was nearly ten o'clock. The door was closed, it seemed as if Sushama was singing softly to herself inside the room. She had never sung before, nor did she know how to sing. Harish stood near the window to listen and find out what song she was singing. He found that it was not a song she was singing, but reciting in a sing-song voice a nursery rhyme which mothers recited when putting

children to sleep. When he knocked at the door, Sushama stopped singing, got up, came to the door and asked, "Who is it?"

"Open the door."

Quickly, she opened the door and said, "I was thinking that perhaps you couldn't come tonight."

Harish had gone to see Sonamoni this time, but strangely enough Sushama did not ask about him at all. She said, "Have a wash, then I'll serve your food."

Harish saw that the cradle had been hung up in the middle of the room and bed-clothes, a little pillow and two tiny bolsters had been arranged in it; and a huge celluloid doll was lying with its head on the pillow. The doll wore a cap on its head, socks on its feet and a pair of gold bangles on its hands. With a laugh Harish asked, "Is this your son?"

Sushama felt shy. She laughed, nodded her head and with a smile she said, "Yes."

After that, the whole affair became extremely funny.

The next day the cat drank up the milk. When Harish finished his meal, he asked, "You didn't give any milk?"

Sushama replied, "Your son is so naughty, he was running about and knocked it over." Harish did not mind this, he laughed and got up. Sushama said again, "He got such a beating for this, that he cried and cried till he fell asleep."

Then, up to late in the night, Sushama told him so many things about her make-believe child. She said that

though he was just learning to speak—he talked like a grown-up. He was just learning to walk, he walked a few steps, then would slip and fall down.

The things she had to say about this child seemed to be endless. Harish fell asleep, but Sushama's eyes were sleepless. She got up from her bed, went and stood near the cradle and saw that her son was sleeping. She then went and stood near the window. The street lights were still burning. There were hardly any people on the street. The sky was bright with moonlight. All the houses near-about were immersed in silence. Perhaps no one was awake anywhere, and why should they remain awake? Everyone slept with their children in their arms, only there was no sleep in the eyes of this poor woman.

Every day they talk about the son. Harish himself nowadays comes and asks, "What's the boy's mother doing? Where's her boy?"

Sushama replies, "He has gone out."

Harish cautions her, "Look, you must take care that he doesn't go anywhere. The streets of Calcutta are full of traffic—perhaps some day—"

A spasm of pain clutches at Sushama's heart. She says, "No, my son is a clever boy, he's not stupid like you."

"Am I stupid?"

"Yes, what else? The other day you lost a five-rupee note, our son told me, 'Father is stupid, twist his ears'."

Then both become silent. Neither of them can find anything to talk about. A little later Sushama says, "Do you know what Khoka says?"

"What does he say?"

"He says, it's very troublesome for you to cook all by yourself mother, you get me married. When my bride comes she'll do your cooking for you."

Harish laughs and asks, "Is that so?"

Sushama nods her head and answers, "Yes, he talks like a grown-up person."

"But you've taught him!"

"Are you crazy? He can teach me things!"

Another day Harish returned from office and saw that Sushama was lying on her bed. She gave no reply when he called her. He asked, "What's happened to you?"

Without raising her head Sushama answered, "Khoka beat me today."

Harish laughed and said, "Is that so? Why?"

"Don't laugh, you've spoilt that child and absolutely ruined him. Now he dares to raise his hand against me—" Sushama's voice really sounded heavy and her eyes were full of tears. There was no end to her craziness!

"What did he beat you with? A stick?"

Sushama flared up, "I don't like this joking over everything. Why should it be with a stick? With his fists, slaps, kicks and in the end—if you don't believe—see here." With this Sushama put out her hand and said, "He bit me with his tiny little teeth. I said, 'Let

me go, my son, let me go.' He said, 'Promise you won't scold me?' When I said I wouldn't, then he let go of me and ran away, he hasn't come back since then."

Harish saw that Sushama herself had bitten her hand and marked it with her own teeth. Had she really gone mad? Harish humoured her, "All right, get up now. Give me some food. I'll teach him a lesson."

Sushama got up and said, "Yes—you only say it. I never see you scolding him at all." With this she went out of the room. Harish sat there silently thinking over something.

In this way Sushama's days do not pass so badly. Six months have gone by. They have changed from that house to another. This house, too, is on the street, but it stands by itself and they have nothing to do with anyone else. There have been some additions to the household goods also. The cradle hangs in the middle of the room; two small iron chairs; a table; a wooden bench; and on it—three boxes in a row with covers on them. Underneath the bench are all the paraphernalia for pan; a new stove with the milk-pan on it; a few pictures on the wall; the bed laid out with bed-clothes—there is no lack of anything.

But Sushama's health seems to have deteriorated a little. There are dark rings round her eyes; day by day she seems to get weaker; her face has lost a lot of its

charm; and her hair has fallen off a lot, which makes her forehead appear impossibly wide. Harish says, "What are you getting to look like day by day? What are you always brooding about?"

Sushama does not believe him. She goes and stands in front of the mirror and says, "Why, I don't see any change."

"You don't realise it yourself, but one doesn't feel like looking at your face these days!"

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Yes it is!"

"What can I do? Tell me." Sushama bends down, looks at her body, heaves a deep sigh and becomes silent.

That night when Harish sat down to eat, Sushama laughed and said, "Look here, unless a woman has a child, everyone finds fault with her." Harish kept quiet. Sushama continued, "When I played as a child, the Chatterjee boy, Moti, would be my husband and I would be his bride. Twenty-four hours I played with my doll-children. I married my dolls, the bride came, I'd quarrel with my son's wife—these were our games. Mother used to say—'It is not good to go on like this. The woman who desires a home so badly never gets a home and the woman who desires a husband badly never gets a husband. The same might happen to you, you'll neither get a home nor a husband!'"

Leave alone speaking, Harish did not even raise his face or look at her. After finishing his meal he said in a grave voice, "Give me milk."

Sushama brought the cup of milk, placed it before her husband and said with a smile, "You talk of my looks, but what need has the mother of a child of looks? Khoka was saying—"

At last Harish spoke. Perhaps he had been getting annoyed for quite a while. Now he raised his face and rolling his eyes in anger, he cried out, "Look here, don't talk about the child all the time. I don't like to hear about it twenty-four hours of the day."

This one cruel kick was enough to smash into pieces the heaven she had built up in her imagination.

The next day something happened to Sushama. She did not speak a word, went about silently, did not answer when Harish called, one kind word from him brought ten harsh replies from her. The whole day she had a disgusted attitude, as if she did not like anything. Harish said, "It's getting late for my office."

Sushama retorted, "What am I to do?"

"What do you mean by 'What am I to do?' It's for you to cook."

"I shan't be able to cook."

"Then am I to cook?"

"If you can't, keep someone to do it for you."

"But if I haven't the means to keep someone?"

Sushama swallowed hard and said, "Then marry

again." Harish did not say anything more and went to have his bath. Sushama served out the food and sat there silently.

Sushama has become bad-tempered and irritable. These days she quarrels, not only with her husband, but even with the inanimate goods of the household. Perhaps a tumbler put down on the floor touches her feet, Sushama does not pick it up, she kicks it and rolls it across the entire floor and pushes it into a corner. The frame of the mirror becomes loose one day, Sushama sits on the floor doing her hair and cannot manage to balance it in front of her, so in a rage she smashes the glass by dashing it on the ground. Things like this happen so many times in a day that one cannot keep account of it. Harish too does not speak properly to Sushama, when he does say something she does not answer him.

Already one cannot recognise her as the same Sushama. Her arms and legs have become thin as sticks, her face wizened and dried up. She does not eat properly. She cannot sleep at night. She does not do her hair. Far from bothering to dress up, she does not even care to put on her saree properly.

Harish himself talks about the child one day. He thinks that he has not mentioned him for a long time, perhaps she will smile if he does. But just the opposite happens! She becomes very angry and cries, "How dare

you! I'm telling you, you mustn't talk about the child. Where's the child? I've no child. My child is dead."

Seeing the expression on her face, Harish does not dare to say anything more.

One day, on his return from the market Harish called out, "Where are you? Do come to this room once."

Sushama came and saw that her husband had brought a maid-servant with him. It was really inconvenient to be without having someone at hand all the time. Harish said, "See if you can manage with this woman."

Sushama asked, "Why a maid-servant?"

"Otherwise, it's very inconvenient for you."

Sushama gazed at her husband's face. He had so much affection, so much kindness for her? Her eyes filled with tears. She wiped away her tears quickly and came near the maid-servant. She asked, "What's your name? Will you work properly? Come with me." Then without waiting for a reply, Sushama took her to the kitchen and bade her sit down.

The maid-servant's name was Khiro. She was fairly young and did her work well. Sushama said, "It's good. At last I have got someone to talk to."

Harish laughed and said, "That's the reason why . . ."

It could be seen that gradually Sushama's depression was disappearing. But within five or six days, a telegram came from Mokshoda. The mother was dying. She asked

Harish to go to her. Telegram in hand, Harish sat down trembling. "What's to be done? Tell me!"

Sushama thought that the mother-in-law being ill, her husband would probably ask her to go with him. But she had no desire to go to her. So she said, "You go first, if you see that her condition is very bad you can come and fetch me."

Harish took leave from his office and went away to see his dying mother the very same day.

Two days later his letter came which said the mother's condition was not very good and the doctor had seen her. But it was not yet so bad that Sushama need come. Let God not make it so, but if it did become serious, he would come and fetch her.

Two days later—another letter: "Mother's fever has come down a little today. I will go back as soon as she is a little better."

Ten days later Harish returned and said that his mother had got well. He saw that the cradle which she had taken down since the day he spoke harshly to Sushama, was once again hung up in the room, but somehow she looked depressed.

That night Harish suddenly drew her close to him like a solicitous husband and said, "Your health is really getting worse day by day. Tell me—what am I to do, Sushama?"

Sushama had not received such tenderness from him for a long time. Her eyes became tearful. She swal-

lowed once, then said, "What are you to do?"

Harish thought over something and said, "I could send you away somewhere for a little while! Perhaps you would come back with your health recouped."

"Where will you send me? Is there anywhere for me to go?" She sighed and then laughed a little. Harish did not say anything more. She too kept silent.

Suddenly one day a letter came in Sushama's name—the address on the envelope was in a woman's handwriting. Harish was not at home. Sushama opened the letter and saw that it was written by her friend Chapala. So at last her friend could make time to write her a letter. But even that was welcome. Laughing happily Sushama sat down to read the letter in great joy.

Chapala had written: 'Dear friend, in much sorrow I have sat down to write this letter to you today. I did not know your address. Sonamoni's father got it the other day from Harish. But tell me—have you no sense? You should not have given up all hopes of having a child so soon. You know there is a saying—a husband is such a thing that one can hand him over to the God of Death, but not to someone else. And in the end you did that? I was really surprised to hear that Harish was getting married again. At first I could not believe it. Later, I found that he really married and brought home a bride. Tapy's mother arranged the marriage. The girl is her eldest daughter Narayani's sister-in-law. For shame friend, the bride is so awful that even the God of Death

would not care to look at her. She is not worthy to be even your maid-servant. I heard that you gave your consent. But I feel very hurt over it. You take my advice. Don't let him go for anything. A sathin (co-wife) should get the broomstick on her face. They came to ask for Sonamoni so that the bride could enter her new home with a son in her arms but I would not send him for all their asking. Write to me how you are. Don't forget to send a letter—your friend, Chapala.'

Sushama's hands began trembling after reading the letter. She did not know what she was to do. The surge of anger which rose in her mind against her husband made her feel bitter and disgusted. She thought, let him come back, she would ask him why he had to deceive her like this. She had nobody to call her own in this world. If there was no room for her here, where was she to go? Where would she go to beg for shelter?

Somehow, she could not put the question to Harish. He moved about the house, Sushama watched him. Somehow, she could not believe that this man had done her down like this. Lest he said 'yes' in answer to her question, she felt afraid to ask him anything and her heart throbbed with fear. When he sat down to eat, Harish laughed and asked, "Hello madam, what's the matter? Why so quiet?"

Sushama did not reply. Harish finished his meal and went to bed. That night Sushama hardly ate anything at all. She closed the door, put out the light, went near

her husband, touched him with her hand and with fear in her heart, she called him, "Listen—"

Harish was probably feeling sleepy; he said, "What?"

The question Sushama wanted to ask, however, would not come out of her mouth, her lips began trembling, her eyes filled with tears. Harish asked, "What were you saying?"

Sushama replied, "Nothing." But her voice was hoarse and one could realise that she was weeping.

Harish could not keep quiet any longer. Sleep immediately departed from his eyes. He turned round and putting his hand on Sushama, he asked, "Are you weeping Sushama?"

Sushama suddenly burst into loud sobs.

Harish asked again, "What's happened to you suddenly? Why are you weeping?"

Sushama replied, "I know why you want to send me away."

This time Harish was completely startled. He said, "Why? Why? What's happened? What for? What do you know? What is it?" Harish went on asking question upon question, irrelevantly, like a thief who babbles nonsense when caught.

Sushama could hardly breathe because of smothered sobs. She could not give an answer to any of his questions. Slowly she brought out her friend's letter from underneath her clothes and put out her hand to Harish. The room was dark, one could not understand whether

it was a piece of paper or a letter, who had written it and what it was about.

Harish immediately jumped out of his bed and switched on the light. He saw that there was a letter in an envelope in Sushama's hand. After he quickly read the letter underneath the light, nothing remained for him to understand. Of course, from the beginning he had been afraid of this. How awful!

He did not know how he was going to explain this, how he was going to get round Sushama. Wondering over this he folded the letter with trembling hands, put it away, then went and stood near Sushama. She was probably still weeping with her face covered up with the bed-clothes.

After spending the whole night in a half-asleep and half-awake state, when Harish rose in the morning, he found that he had got up very late. He had not been aware when Sushama had got up and sat down to cook after lighting the kitchen fire.

Anyway, Harish had not expected that Sushama would get up today and sit down to cook. The first blow of any sorrow was always very difficult to bear. Since she had managed to get over that, there was nothing to worry about. Feeling very pleased he had a wash, then the moment he came and sat down in the room, Sushama brought his tea.

There seemed no end to Harish's joy. He put out his hand and caught the end of her saree; drew Sushama

close to him and said, "Wonderful! This is what it should be. Who is she? Just a nobody! Don't you worry, my beloved queen!"

Sushama did not laugh nor did she cry. She did not even raise her face and look up. Slowly, she went into the kitchen.

When Harish came and sat down to have his meal after his bath, he saw that nothing was missing. Everything was as perfect as possible. On the contrary, the meal was better cooked than other days. Harish thought to himself, perhaps after all this time Sushama had realised her folly—probably learnt her lesson at last. After finishing his meal with great relish, Harish called Sushama and said, "Don't grieve. Good girl!"

The moment he said this, a flood of tears rushed down from Sushama's eyes. She gazed fixedly at her husband's face with those tearful eyes, nodded her head, and still weeping, she said, "No, I won't."

Evening was still a long time off. That day Harish came out of his office earlier than usual.

Sushama's behaviour in the morning had been exceptionally nice. She had proved her nobility. Harish was thinking of this on his way home. When he got down from the bus, he lit a biri in a very pleased frame of mind. His home was only two or three minutes away. The biri was not yet finished. When he came near his front door, he saw that a big crowd had gathered on the road just in front of his house and a couple of constables

were trying to move people away from there. /

Harish quickened his footsteps and came forward to find out what had happened. He saw that his door was open, and when he was about to enter it, suddenly Khiro—the maid-servant—came rushing from somewhere, fell on his feet and cried out, “Oh, master—a terrible thing has happened!”

The maid-servant did not tell him anything clearly. Harish’s frame of mind was not such that he could stand there and listen to her either. He rushed inside madly. When he got to the door of his bedroom he saw that it was closed from inside. Two men in European clothes, probably police inspectors, stood there and did not allow him to go straight in. They held him by the hand, restrained him from entering and asked, “Is this your house?”

Perplexed and bewildered Harish replied, “Yes,” in a flabbergasted manner.

“Your wife has committed suicide by hanging herself. We came here on getting the news from your maid-servant.”

Harish did not wait to hear anything more. He pushed the closed door with both hands and it fell open. The window on the other side was closed and the room was dark. Right in the middle of the room, Sushama’s dead body was hanging. She had cut a rope from the swinging cradle and had put it round her neck; below her feet was a table, probably she had put the iron chair

on top of it and kicked it off. Her face was turned away from him. He was not able to muster up enough courage to go and look at it. Still, unconsciously he tiptoed and drew near the dead body.

But he could not gaze for long at Sushama's face, distorted with the agony of death.

Today, probably she had not tied up her hair after having her bath. Her wet hair was hanging in a black mass all around her. She was wearing a beautiful blouse and her most favourite saree; half of it had slipped off her shoulder and was sweeping the floor. Harish shivered. In a choked voice he screamed: "Ugh! Untie that rope! Take her down! Take her down!"

The rope was cut and the body brought down. The hospital ambulance had already arrived. The inspector said, "The body must be sent to the morgue." Harish looked up in amazement at the inspector's face once. The inspector thought that probably he was asking him not to take Sushama's body away. He said, "Can't be helped, I have to send the body."

The inspector said, "Come."

The next day, waiting anxiously hour after hour, to Harish, time seemed to have stopped moving.

In the end, when it was about eleven, accompanied by several students, the inspector and a couple of nurses—the doctor himself came and stood near Harish. He

asked, "Your wife?"

Harish got up and said, "Yes."

The inspector asked, "Was she expecting a child?"

Harish shook his head and said, "No."

The inspector smiled, then he signed to Harish and said, "Come."

Mechanically Harish followed them through two or three rooms, climbed a flight of stairs, and then stood in an upstairs room. On a big glass table in front of him lay his very same Sushama. Her unbound hair was scattered here and there on the glass; the vermilion mark burned bright on her parting; and her feet were painted with blood-red lac. Excepting her face, her entire body had been cut to pieces. Harish looked at it for a moment, then shivered and closed his eyes. One student was kind enough to cover her up from head to foot with a white sheet.

But the doctor had not called him to show him Sushama. He told Harish to come forward nearer the table and held something covered with a cloth in his hand and said, "Look! She was pregnant."

Hearing this so suddenly, Harish started violently. He saw within the fleshy lump of the embryo—the unborn, immature but complete body of a tiny child. The hands were formed, the feet were formed—head, face, nose—one could at once make out the child—only the eyes had not yet opened.

They had cut open Sushama and brought it out.

Harish felt a queer sensation in his head. He could no longer remain standing, being without food or sleep throughout the night. He managed to control himself once by catching hold of the table, then defeated, he sat down on the floor—overwhelmed with weariness and despair.



SUBODH GHOSE



GOTRANTAR

OR

He Changed His Caste

MOKATPUR! THAT OLD HALF-RUINED HOUSE ON A MUDDY road! The white-ant riddled bamboo trellis below the tiled roof rains an incessant stream of powdery white dust. For three years the house has not even been white-washed. Full of a crowd of people—grown-ups, children, wet napkins and dirty beddings, this was Sanjoy's sweet home!

The hunger for food and clothes could no longer be met with the limited dole elder brother alone gave every month. Every luxury had already been reduced. Now the stomach was being pinched cruelly. Ghee, sugar, tea—every month elder brother was slicing off bits of the family's hungry tongue. There was no other way. Who knew, that with all his education when it came to earning money Sanjoy would have to sit idle like a cripple? Not for one day or two, but for four long years.

The afternoon's light stormy breeze made the dried beans on the Sirish tree swing with a jingling noise like the sound of heavy anklet-bells. This time of the day was always nice. The whole day's store of laziness turned into a sweet lethargy.

Sitting in the verandah with a glass of tea sweetened with molasses in his hand, Sanjoy was re-tasting his daily worries with every sip.

Each one look out for yourself! In season, out of season, elder brother was reminding everyone. But four years ago, this very same elder brother had carried food in a tiffin-carrier on the day of the examination and waited in

front of the gates of the college hall. But that was another day. Elder brother's hopes and ambitions were then like a garland of humble desires—blackened with sorrow and want. The weariness of this constant want would one day be washed away; Sanjoy would get a job; the touch of a silver wand would make the Dutt house in Mokatpur shine with plenty. This was the foregone conclusion.

M.A. degree; three certificates for character, health and proficiency in games; three articles on Economics written by himself published in a foreign magazine; medals for singing and acting; a letter of praise for his unremitting services during the earthquake—Sanjoy's varied and versatile genius now lay rotting in a box tied up in a big bundle. For four years, he had sent in innumerable applications without getting a job. Elder brother had lost all hope. Even mother's tongue now overflowed with nagging words.

Sanjoy felt utterly abashed. During these four wretched years, moment by moment, his worries had shattered many of his illusions. In the olden days anyone in his position would have left home and become a sannyasi. But Sanjoy was made of a different metal. Every maxim of the twentieth century's revolutionary economics was known to him.

Sanjoy realised that here affection was only a commodity for sale. Every blessing given was the notice of a

creditor's demand. True, if he got a headache, his little four-year-old niece Putul would come and stroke his hair to soothe the ache. But Sanjoy knew that even this tiny little girl's show of devotion hid a shrewd business sense. As soon as her task was over, she would make a straightforward demand—"I want a silk ribbon."

On the surface everything was so lovely. Father, mother, brother, sister, one's kith and kin, home was a nest of affection. What high falutin' sentiments! But scratch it just a little and the skin would reveal a shameless Shylock's flesh! Sanjoy could not help laughing sometimes. Of course this was nothing new. For millions of years this order had trickled down through the veins of history, beginning from the caveman's family life down to the pattern of domesticity in the household of the Dutts in Mokatpur. Love, friendship, affection, were like chillies, molasses, ginger and pepper; whoever could pay for these was looked upon as the dearest one.

Sumitra too had not been round this side for a long time. Perhaps the wind of love too had changed its course. It was, however, not surprising. Sumitra's father Abhoy Babu too seemed to have changed his attitude completely. He had mortgaged his house. Could it be that a groom had been found even for such a one as Sumitra?

On the last day of the Pujas, last year, she had come to pay her respects. In the Champa-coloured saree even that terribly dark girl had looked so beautiful. Sumitra's sandalwood-decorated forehead had rested languidly on

Sanjoy's feet for over two minutes. It felt as if this grown-up maiden's youth was beating its head in mute sorrow. Sumitra had fallen in love.

These memories of past days—it was pleasant to ponder over them, but sister-in-law came and interrupted, “Have you heard the news about Abhoy Babu's family, brother?”

“No.”

“The Sub-registrar, Nabin Babu and Sumitra are to be—”

“Married. Isn't it?”

Sister-in-law smiled and went away. That smile was like a taunt. Let it go. The biggest illusion too was smashed, that was the only gain. Those tears, obeisance tendered at his feet, that face blushing with shyness—what a piece of sharp, subtle, pure coquetry it was! While realising this he had pretended not to recognise it, that was his crime.

He must go away, while there was still time, or else, in this auction-house, his whole manhood would be sold away as a counterfeit commodity. He would have to leave behind the hypocritical wiles of this genteel household. Just because of a false illusion about a caste-name he could not mortgage his entire life's ideals and desires, like an absolute beast. Sanjoy realised that his greatest need was Gotrantar—a change of caste.



Sanjoy was going to a far-away place. A job worth thirty rupees in the Ratanlal Sugar Mills; but the question of high or low salary did not arise. Within this thirty-rupee job, he had caught the glimpse of a palace of unbounded freedom.

On the day of leaving, this worn old house in Mokatpur seemed once again to try and exert all its magic with the intent to damp all Sanjoy's enthusiasm. The brothers and sisters were packing his trunk and bedding; little Putul was clinging to him from early morning like a mole on his body, her desire seemed to be—'I won't let you go.' The sting in his father's conversation had entirely vanished, he was restless and unable to smoke his tobacco in peace. Mother had not yet come out of the kitchen; sitting in front of the kitchen fire she seemed to be trying to make up for her past miserliness. She cooked three kinds of fish-curries alone.

Elder brother seemed to be the most upset. He said, "Go with a happy frame of mind and remember that an enterprising lion among men is bound to receive Lakshmi's favour. One day you might become the owner of that mill. What was Sir Rajendra one day? Always keep your eyes fixed on future prospects."

Sanjoy breathed a sigh of relief when he got into the motor-bus.

On one side lay the dried-up river bed, and on the other three—jungle, and in between the 84 Parganas. The Grand Chord line ran like a pulse-beat through the

midst of the jungle. A range of chalk hills ran along, up to Kodarma station.

The name of the mill area was Ratanganj—a bazar, and far and near, all around, the quarters of the coolies and workers. All over the entire stretch of 84 Parganas were scattered fields full of vegetables and sugar-cane; ugly scare-crows; little huts for the men who drove away the marauding wild swine; narrow, twisting channels of water, and in between big wooden posts suspended • with buckets to water the fields; like ship's masts they floated in this ocean of green.

The crops of sugar-cane became ripe. Thin sticks standing a foot apart—high as two men. On their heads—banners like strips of green silk. Bustees of the chattries—the warrior caste, and ahirs—the cowherds, whose bones for generations had manured the earth of 84 Parganas and turned it into gold.

The owner of the mill Rai Bahadur Ratanlal was a very good and polite man. He even addressed a petty pan-man with the respectful 'you' and not as 'thou.' Before his early morning bath every day he went round scattering handfuls of sugar on all ant-holes.

Sanjoy was the cash clerk. The Rai Bahadur assured him, "This mill belongs to you, if it makes progress you will also progress. Prove your worth. There is plenty of prospect here."

Rubbing the challan-receipt register and ledger; notes; money and small change, month after month, the tips of

his fingers seemed to have become poisoned. In the sound of the crushing machines; mountains of crushed cane husks and the smell of unrefined molasses—there was nowhere the sign of any prospect. Neither did any such impertinence as a futile hope lurk anywhere in Sanjoy's mind. He knew the ways of such honey-tongued money-pots only too well.

It was not the hope of prospects but a far greater and grimmer determination which had brought him here. Like a run-away convict he must completely craze his old self.

The strange character of a particular individual made Sanjoy feel very worried. His name was Neymiar. He was absolute poison in the eyes of the mill officials. He had been working as a loading clerk here for the last five years. He started on a salary of thirty rupees and had come down to a salary of fifteen now. Even the man's shadow seemed to possess a terrible contagion of ill luck.

He was ugly, moreover he suffered from pleurisy. Three days in the week, pressing his ribs against the table he would lie there immobile. To see him one would think that the man must be spineless, otherwise, how could he lie like that, twisted and rolled up like a worm?

Then there was Rukmini—Neymiar's sister. Everyone—the old hands and new, in the mill, had all warned Sanjoy; "Bengali Babu, keep out of the clutches of that pair—both the brother and the sister!"

Without any encouragement from Sanjoy, Neymiar

tried to be intimate with him. Suddenly one day he came and said, "Don't drink water from anywhere except the number one well. You will get malaria." Another day he brought several bottles—Iodine, Castor Oil and Quinine pills. "I brought these from Kodarma hospital for you."

Sanjoy was just waiting to see where this unselfish friendship would end. In three weeks Neymiar's mask fell off. Sanjoy was writing up a ledger in his office. He looked up and saw Neymiar standing, his two little eyes were burning with a flickering fire.

Neymiar said, "Now get a gun-license Babuji. We will go shooting together. Rabbit roast will go very well with double-brewed mahua liquor every day."

When Sanjoy showed no enthusiasm, he paused and thought over something and said suddenly in a hurried manner, "Give me a loan of five rupees Babuji. Next month you will get six rupees and eight annas."

Sanjoy gave a straight answer, "Nothing doing, excuse me."

When Neymiar had gone Sanjoy smiled to himself. He knew the uttermost wiles of the human heart. He was not to be got at so easily, what was Neymiar after all! But, he had yet to know Neymiar.

At night, above the sound of pouring rain someone was heard knocking on the door. As soon as Sanjoy opened the door Rukmini entered with a tray of food in her hands.

"It's Neymiar's birthday today. Neymiar said, you are his only friend, so I brought a little food for you."

When she finished speaking Rukmini put down the tray of food and sat on one side of the wooden bed and laughed.

Sanjoy saw Rukmini properly now for the first time. The girl was dark and thin. She had bright, intelligent eyes. Dark patches below her eyes bespoke of many sleepless nights. But still one realised that if only she was fed properly how charming this face would look! She was wearing an expensive saree and smelt of an expensive foreign perfume. But of all her features the most beautiful were her teeth. When she spoke, they seemed like rows of tiny white pearls. When she laughed, those pearls suddenly burst open like a bunch of flower-buds.

Seeing Sanjoy engrossed in her, Rukmini turned away her face and said, "Finish your food, I will wait till you have eaten."

As soon as he finished eating, Rukmini got up and with quick gestures of her hands picked up all the dishes and said, "It's very late, I am going now Babuji."

Sanjoy said in a slightly embarrassed manner, "How will you go alone?"

"Oh, I'll manage to go." With a burst of laughter, just as Rukmini put her foot out of the door, Sanjoy suddenly caught her wrist.

Rukmini remonstrated, "These dishes will fall just now. Wait, let me put them down first."

A few days later Neymiar came and stood before Sanjoy's table in his office. The spineless creature's eyes were burning again, lowering his voice he said, "You love Rukmini?"

The sudden question made Sanjoy start. Neymiar said again, "But that's something to be happy about. Why feel ashamed? All right, I must go now. Give—"

Sanjoy : "What?"

"—the five rupees you had promised."

"Thank you!" Putting the note in his pocket Neymiar continued, "Whenever you need anything just tell me."

Sanjoy had really changed his caste. Just as a bird gets his mate by giving the love-call, Rukmini had come to him like that. This girl of the streets alone had accepted his humiliated manhood with reverence. This was much better than inane domesticity. The first chapter of his revolution was complete.

Letters came from home. Typical letters from a Bengali home: "How are you? What progress have you made? There is so much want in the household. It would be good if you could send something."

Letters came, but no answers were sent. In between remained a big distance of sandy waste and quicksands. The letters seemed like bits out of a newspaper. Suffering and want did not reside in the Dutt house in Mokatpur alone. This Neymiar's wife had committed suicide by jumping into a well with three children in her arms. Neymiar carried about cuttings from newspapers con-

taining this news in his breast-pocket. When the sorrows of the world were mended so would the sorrows of the Dutt household.

Sometimes the intoxication of strong country liquor set his head on fire and Sanjoy's eyes would begin to water. Rukmini begged him to tell her why he wept.

Sanjoy tore those letters and burnt them with the frenzy of a mad Brahmin who burns his sacred thread.

Thousands of miles away from the 84 Parganas, on the other side of the salt ocean, in the land of the Dutch, the money-goddess became a widow. The gold standard was cancelled and the rate of exchange changed completely overnight. In one stroke the price of the guilder came down and became cheap.

That angry wind of trade navigated the sky and rushed into port in Calcutta. Tons and tons of Java sugar were being landed at a cheap price. The Indian Chamber of Commerce was feeling depressed. Motipur, Champaran and Cawnpore Special sugar lay weeping inside bags at all the depôts.

The curse of the Dutch market fell on the Ratanlal Mills and the cane-fields of the 84 Parganas. In every home of the mill-workers the Manager went round reading out a notice—a forty per cent cut in pay and wages.

The peasants crowded round the mill gates. The Manager put his mouth over the megaphone and shout-

ed out the price of sugar-cane: "Eleven pice a maund! Those who are willing to sell must send in their crops from tomorrow."

Till evening, the crowd of workers and peasants sat stunned in front of the mill gates. The Rai Bahadur's son, Surja Babu, had gone to put in a trunk-call to Calcutta to find out the state of the sugar market there.

Rai Bahadur came out himself with folded hands and asked the crowd to disperse. He said, "What is the good of creating all this trouble, my fathers? All this is a turn of fate—go and pray to God and ask for better days to return."

Amongst all the peasants Muniram was a headstrong man. He had the tongue to answer back, he said, "But the Government have fixed the price at four annas and nine pies, huzur."

Rai Bahadur replied with a sweet smile, "Forget all those happy dreams my brothers. That kingdom of Rama has passed. Goods from Java are committing dacoity now. Everything is on fire. I hope the mill will not have to be closed down."

Muniram was not the man to give up so easily. He said, "Tomorrow we will send you our wives and children. Be kind enough to shoot them down, that will be far better."

Rai Bahadur scolded them most affectionately, "Foolish mules! Go and cool your heads at home. Oh, Shanker the brave, now close the gates."

Like a defeated army the crowd turned back from the gates. Workers and coolies turned on their way home. Only Sanjoy walked in another direction. With him were Neymiar, Muniram, Shuklal, Chedi and a few other peasants. They came noiselessly and sat on the steps of the old Shiva temple under the big banyan tree. Sanjoy said, "We must take our revenge for this."

Muniram's very soul seemed to have been waiting for this one word of courage. He jumped up and said, "For Heaven's sake, Bengali Babu, tell us the way out."

God knows what induced some of the foolish-looking peasants to yell out: "Har Har! Mahadev!"

Neymiar turned on them in a rage, "Shut up, don't make any noise," he cried.

After a few moments of silence, Sanjoy proposed, "No one will sell their crop."

Everyone replied, "That's right."

"Don't bring down your price, in the end they will have to buy. Many new machines have arrived. They will have to keep the mill going."

Shuklal said, "But supposing they don't buy?"

The problem was nearly settled, but Shuklal's question started arguments all over again.

Sanjoy got up and said, "They will be forced to buy. Begin the fight all of you. Take your oath on the banyan leaf that you will fight them."

There was a strange fervour of hope in Sanjoy's words. The little clouds of doubt which had lingered, now blew

away in the storm of enthusiasm and oath-taking. With a touch of this holy wind the mute deaf image in the old temple seemed suddenly to wake up.

The meeting ended.

As soon as Sanjoy came near Rukmini's home, he said, "Neymiar, you had better go now, begin from today and organise well."

* "All right, Babuji."

After Neymiar had gone Sanjoy stood silent in the darkness for a long time. Sanjoy, the holder of a M.A. degree, had been turned into a petty cash-clerk. It seemed as if his insulted genius had been counting the days like a snake with hood lowered in futile rage. Now it was time to strike and pour out as much venom as was possible. In the darkness, Sanjoy rigged out all his thoughts in military array and got ready for battle. The chimney of the Ratanlal Mills could be seen faintly. It looked like the raised head of a dinosaur which stared down at the broad cane-fields of the 84 Parganas. Sanjoy knew that somewhere under that monstrous heap of fat, a heart must be hidden; the blow must be carefully aimed there.

Full of elation Sanjoy entered Rukmini's room.

The extravagance of his caresses made Rukmini suddenly question him, "You've got the goods very cheap, haven't you? Still, one day you are bound to leave me."

“Cheap? Have I anything more left to give? And why should I leave you?”

As if touched with a little remorse Rukmini put her hand over Sanjoy's mouth and said, “All right! All right! Forgive me, I won't say it again. But the other day, while you were drunk, you yourself said that I was only the tumbler which held sherbet, but not the sherbet itself.” Then without waiting for Sanjoy's answer Rukmini continued, “I want a good amount of money. Now, look at me once properly.” Then she removed the end of her saree from her shoulders and stood up straight. “Do you understand? How am I to manage?”

“Yes! I do understand.” Sanjoy turned very grave.

All the machines in the Ratanlal Mills were closed down. Only a few carts of sugar were obtainable. The last day for supplying orders from the Calcutta market was fast approaching. Rai Bahadur was running round madly back and forth, between the mill and the bungalow of the sub-divisional officer in town.

In field after field the crops of 84 Parganas were drying up. Agents were rushing from bustee to bustee with carts and bags of money. They were saying: release your crops now, for, if once the leaves turn brown, we will not pay even an anna as price. The peasants smiled and remained silent. Neymiar had absolutely disappeared. He did not stay at home nor did he come to office.

He was flying around the fields and bustees of 84 Parganas like a crow, cawing: "Be warned, don't be frightened by what the agents are saying. Ratanlal Mill is being frozen."

For the last few days, vultures had been circling over the 84 Parganas. Cattle-disease had broken out. One of Muniram's sons too had died of small-pox.

Moneylenders were knocking from door to door taking round their red cloth-bound ledger-books and mortgage bonds demanding repayment of loans. A labour recruiter got hold of thirty men and disappeared with them to the rubber-gardens of Malaya. On the road leading to Kadamsagar a bullock-cart had been looted. Military police had done a route march.

Cowherds from Kodarma were flocking around like a band of locusts. They were buying buffaloes for five rupees, milch cows for eight rupees and calves for twelve annas. The moneylenders were giving loans on mortgaged silver ornaments, at a high rate of interest. Brass and bell-metal household utensils were being sold at the price of mud. In every home in 84 Parganas wild herbs and leaves were being boiled and eaten. In every home the stores of foodgrain were empty.

It was a nearly a month now. Rai Bahadur was cursing his agents. They must get the raw material however they could. His prestige in the market was tottering. His machines were getting rusty.

The sub-divisional officer came and inspected the mill.

His peons had informed the people of 84 Parganas by beat of drums: "Take heed everyone! Sell your crops now, only one more day's time is being given you! Or else, from tomorrow, crops will be bought from Loya-bad Pargana!"

Muniram and Shuklal came in the evening. Their looks were that of mangy dogs. Yet, hope was still burning in their eyes, they were only begging for an order—"Babuji, what do we have to do now? Give us the order."

Sanjoy replied, "Wait a few days more."

Muniram and Shuklal waited without speaking a word for some time and then went away. Probably there was something which they wanted to say, but it remained unspoken.

All the happenings seemed to become suddenly complicated. Rai Bahadur had not yet called upon Sanjoy to render help or advice in the face of such trouble, even though Sanjoy had hinted one day: "If you like I might try to quieten down the peasants."

On the other hand, Rukmini too had swallowed a thorn. Something must be arranged now on both sides. But how could one arrange anything without Neymiar? Whenever there was work to be done, he was really a great help.

Neymiar came and stood before him.



The dim dirty light of a kerosene lamp—a dirty khaki pant, a torn shirt, a wild shock of hair—untidy as a crow's nest. That worm Neymiar stood up like a statue made of iron, slim and hard. This casteless man's real image struck Sanjoy with a strange fear, he sat with his head bowed.

Neymiar had come to ask him for the keys of the cash-room. "Like a lizard I will lick up and bring whatever money there is in there and then set fire to the room. The file-register will be burnt to ashes. Who will be able to make you responsible? Who will be able to say how much cash balance there was? Come on, give the key to me!"

Sanjoy raised his head and looked out into the darkness outside. Had the light been a little brighter, one could have seen that his two knees began suddenly to tremble violently with a sudden gust of shivering.

Neymiar it seemed was singing a terrible meaningless ballad. Food, first of all, the 84 Parganas required food. Then we would see how they could bring crops from outside down the Loyabad Road. No one would sell his crops. They would rot on every field. They would be burnt to ashes. The peasants had all taken this oath. Tonight in every home long poles were being polished and got ready. They would break their own heads and in return break that of others.

A face pitted with small-pox marks, round marble-like eyes, short, thin; skin the colour of a dung-cake—this

Neymiar of whom even a sparrow could not feel afraid, today he had come and was standing before Sanjoy, with the threat of an oncoming revolution in his hands.

Sanjoy's ardour had become suddenly very damp. Neymiar patted his back and said, "What is all this worry about comrade-brother? Your peasant-army must be fed. Come, don't delay any more."

Neymiar slipped out into the darkness with the bunch of keys of the cash-room.

Sanjoy paced the room in a demented manner for a long time. Then he came out and stood there to cool himself with a breath of fresh air. He had never imagined that this little strife would lead to such a terrible end. Who had thought that the tame lion which was brought out into the circus arena only to perform his tricks, would with just a little poking, snarl wildly, and turn so disobedient.

"Neymiar!" Sanjoy's cracked voice trembled and echoed in the darkness.

Sanjoy broke into a run.

From a crack in the window in Rukmini's room emerged a dim light and a moaning sound as of a string instrument. Sanjoy held his breath and stood with his eyes glued to the crack in the window.

Rukmini was rolling on the floor. Her saree had come off. Only the knot remained round her waist. Her hair

which dragged on the mud floor was full of dirt. Her glass bangles had broken to pieces and bits of glass were scattered all over the floor. Coiling and uncoiling like a snake, which had been hit with a stick, Rukmini was rolling and moaning.

It seemed as if Rukmini's life-breath had gathered into a terrible storm and was trying to burst forth from her body. People do die in such a condition. Was this then what was in store for Rukmini also?

The familiar blue veins on her smooth uncovered knees were swelling up like leeches replete with blood. Her teeth were set hard on her lips. Floods of tears were rolling from the corners of her eyes down to her ears. Her muffled screams of pain rose higher and higher. Her lungs would perhaps burst! Was this then death?

What a cruel disillusion! From behind this mock death the seed of a new life was reaching out its hands towards the earth, turning this pain and agony into a blessing. Sanjoy jumped backwards and stood beneath a tree.

Where was Neymiar? Sanjoy went forward again and looked through a crack in Neymiar's door.

Wearing a pair of black pants with a white belt tightened round his waist, Neymiar was chewing dry bread and drinking strong country liquor from a big pot. A sharp dagger lay in front of him. On his face was a strange look of satisfaction; on his two dry lips, the feline smile of a panther.

In this room the brother, in the other the sister. They

seemed like an angry demon and witch from some strange savage world brewing terror with their magic.

Like a fisherman who ran away carrying all his possessions on his back when a sudden flood came bringing in its wake, terrific, roaring currents of water—Sanjoy too ran.

Sanjoy was running not on the road, but crossing fields, slopes and ditches, he ran. The light on the mill gates burned like a will-o'-the-wisp in the fog. It was not very far away now.

And how far was Mokatpur either? If one caught the train towards early morning, he could get there in the afternoon. The beans on the Sirish tree were probably ripe, they rang in the soft breeze of the golden afternoon with the sound of heavy anklet-bells. Elder brother sat on the verandah drinking tea sweetened with molasses. Mother sat in the courtyard cleaning the Goddess Lakshmi's throne. Putul pointed her finger to the sky and counted the flocks of flying kites—one, two, three. Sumitra was perhaps not yet married. Her seeking eyes gazed around the windows of the Dutt house in Mokatpur—towards the road—towards the motor-bus which rushed along.

Rai Bahadur Ratanlal, Surja Babu, the Manager—in front of them Sanjoy sat on a stool, looking like a pale and emaciated invalid. His voice was like a cracked bell.

He had been given a glass of hot milk to drink.

Rai Bahadur called out, "Shanker the brave! Put a guard round the cash-room. Neymiar threatened Babuji with a dagger and took away the keys. Tonight he will come to steal. You must catch the wretched thief red-handed. Make arrangements."

Then he ordered the Manager, "Babuji will go to the railway station. Quickly have a good horse saddled for him. Open my iron safe, I must give him a reward. What a faithful, honest boy!"

Sanjoy saluted and got up to go. Rai Bahadur told him, "Go and take rest in your home for a few days. Then come and join my mill at Gorakhpur. You will be paid a salary of hundred rupees."

Sanjoy galloped away on the narrow track through the jungles by the side of the range of chalk hills. The breast of the sky flamed red. The peasants had set fire to each of their fields. 84 Parganas was being purified with fire.

One more field to cross, then the railway station. The light of the distant signal was floating in the distance like a blue star. A sudden splashing sound of water. The horse had stepped into a stream. Sanjoy got off from the horse and sat by the stream, filling his hands with water he drank greedily again and again. A jackal which had just finished eating a hen stolen from some household, was sitting on the wet sand, licking the blood on his mouth. He, too, came down to drink and put his mouth into the same flowing current of water.

TARASHANKAR BANERJEE



JALSAGHAR
OR
The Hall of Entertainment

AS USUAL BISWAMBHAR ROY WOKE UP AT THREE O'CLOCK in the morning and began to pace to and fro on the roof-terrace. His old bearer Ananta brought a small carpet and a bolster and spread it out on the terrace for him to sit on and then went down to get his hubble-bubble. Biswambhar Roy glanced towards the carpet once, but did not sit down. He went on pacing to and fro with bent head, as he was doing before. Not very far away, below the Kali Temple belonging to the Roys, the clear white waters of the Ganges flowed past in a narrow stream.

On the south-eastern corner of the sky, the morning star burned like a white flame. The electric light on the top of the palace of the new-rich Ganguly's blazed, it seemed, in competition with the star's light. The gong on the roof of the Ganguly house struck the hour three. For two hundred years up to this time this gong had sounded in the Roy house; now it no longer sounded here. Now, Biswambhar woke up in the morning through sheer habit and the sound of pigeons cooing, which began every day with the rise of the morning star.

A sweet fragrance was borne on the soft spring air. Spring no longer heralded its approach with either pomp or splendour in the Roy mansion; and the Roys no longer had any offering to give at the feet of Spring. The flower-garden was dead and bare because there were no gardeners to tend it. A few big flowering trees alone remained—Muchkunda, Bokul, Nagaeshwar, Champa.

These trees were bereft of twigs and branches like the Roy family itself, they were ancient, ruined and moth-eaten like this broken-down huge old palace.

From the stables a horse neighed.

Ananta came and put a lighted bowl on top of the hubble-bubble and called, "Huzur."

Biswambhar came out of his daze and said, "Yes."

Slowly he came and sat down on the carpet and Ananta held up the long pipe of the hubble-bubble to his hand. Down below the horse neighed again.

Biswambhar gave two or three slow pulls at his pipe and said, "The Muchkunda flowers are blossoming now. Put some of them in my sherbet from today."

Ananta scratched his head and said, "The petals are not ripe yet."

In the stables the horse was neighing impatiently again and again. With a sigh Roy said in a slightly disgusted manner, "Has that fellow Nitay begun to oversleep in his old age? Go and call him. Toofan is restless. Don't you hear him neighing?"

'Toofan' (cyclone) was the only horse which remained in the nine big stables of the Roys. Twenty-five years ago, old Toofan had been the riding horse of the brave young gallant Biswambhar Roy; and every morning the fiery Toofan would be out at dawn with Biswambhar Roy on his back; but two years ago when the moneylenders—the Gangulies—had gone from village to village heralding their ownership by beat of drums,

from that day Toofan's back became riderless.

His manager, Taraprasanna, said one day to Biswambhar Roy, "It has been such a long habit of yours, if you give up riding now, your health might—" but seeing the look in Biswambhar's eyes Taraprasanna could not finish what he had to say. Roy had answered him in only two words, "Shame! Taraprasanna!"

Ananta was going downstairs, Biswambhar called him back. He said, "Nitay was telling me yesterday that Toofan was not getting his full feed."

Ananta replied, "Our crop of gram isn't good this year. So the manager said—"

"Yes!" Then pulling at his pipe Biswambhar asked again, "Has Toofan grown very thin?"

Ananta murmured, "No! Not much."

"Yes!" Then after a pause Biswambhar continued, "Give him his full feed. Understand? Tell the manager I've said so. Go now and call Nitay."

Ananta went away. Reclining against the bolster, Biswambhar stared up into the sky. The long pipe of his hubble-bubble lay neglected beside him. One by one the stars went out in the sky. Absent-mindedly Biswambhar began stroking his fair chest. One, two, the first day he had ridden Toofan, he had hurt this rib. How Toofan had looked that day; how spritely and restless he was! He could be quietened only when he heard the sound of music. When music played, Toofan never missed a step. Curving his neck, how he would dance!

Biswambhar got up. Like the sun which put out the light of the stars, the memories of his past were always dimmed by the rays of his family pride. Today, that blazing sun of family pride was suddenly completely eclipsed by the shadow of a strange tenderness. The brightest star of his memory—Toofan, flamed up in the sky of Biswambhar's heart. For two years he had not gone downstairs. Now yearning to see Toofan he came down to the first floor. The long verandah round the huge courtyard of his house resounded with the sound of Roy's wooden sandals. From the shutters on the top of row upon row of round pillars, startled bats flew out. From inside the dark locked-up rooms the whirr of bats' wings could also be heard. Next to the staircase was the linen-room, which stored all the carpets, durries and white sheets big enough to cover the entire floor of a room. Then, from the room next to it, a whirr of bats' wings mingled with a tinkling sound. This was the lamp-room; pieces of crystal hangings on the big chandeliers were probably tinkling.

Roy turned round the corner, these were the quarters where the big tenant-lessees in different districts were lodged when they came. Some of the richest lessees of these parts were under the jurisdiction of the Roy estate. There were not a few such lessees who paid from five hundred to five thousand rupees as yearly rent.

At the eastern end of the verandah there was a staircase. *Roy* came down the stairs to the ground floor.

The long row of office-rooms overflowed with stack upon stack of papers and records of the Roy family.

These records contained the history of the seven Roys. Biswambhar Roy was the seventh in the line of the Roy zamindars. In the darkness he smiled recalling that the first of the Roys used to say: "To bind the Goddess of wealth—Lakshmi, one must seek the kindness of the Goddess of Learning—Saraswati. Chains forged with ink on paper—they are very strong chains indeed. Keep your chain of accounts intact—fleet-footed Lakshmi will never be able to flee." He had been a settlement officer in the Durbar of the Nawabs. Paper, pen, ink—everything was there but the Goddess Lakshmi had nevertheless deserted them.

Beyond the office-rooms on the right were the cow-houses and on the left—the stables; further beyond were the temples.

Roy called out, "Nitay."

"Huzur," came the respectful answer which was drowned by Toofan's loud neighing. From the other side came the sound of an elephant's trumpet.

Roy went forward and stood before Toofan. Impatiently stamping his feet, old Toofan became as playful as a child. Stroking his face Roy said, "Beta!" (my son). Toofan rubbed his head on his master's hand. The elephant too had become impatient, after trumpeting again and again she now tried to tear her chains. The Mahut Rahmat hearing his master's voice had come and stood

near his elephant, softly he complained, "Master, the Young Mistress will tear her chains."

The elephant was called 'Young Mistress.' She had been a part of the wedding dowry of Biswambhar's mother. She was called 'Moti' to begin with, but after her master Dhaneshwar Roy had come back from a shikar he suddenly had gone crazy over 'Moti,' because she had caught a leopard with her trunk and then crushed it with her feet. Seeing the care lavished on 'Moti' by her husband, Biswambhar's mother had named the elephant 'Sathin' (co-wife). Her husband had retorted, "That's good, Mistress Roy, her name too will be Mistress Roy now, on;" and Biswambhar's mother had replied, "No, not just Mistress Roy, she'll be called the 'Young Mistress,' she's your second wife."

In response to Rahmat's request Biswambhar left Toofan and went to the Young Mistress. At his back Toofan's angry neighing could be heard. Roy said to the elephant, "How now young mother!" The elephant twisted her trunk and held it in front of Roy. This was a request to him to get up on her back. Roy always used to climb up on the elephant's back by scaling her trunk. Roy stroked her trunk and said, "Not now mother . . . " The Young Mistress understood him, she put her trunk on Roy's shoulder and waited quietly like a good little girl. Roy called out, "Nitay, take Toofan out for a walk."

Diffidently Nitay replied, "Toofan won't go today

after seeing you, huzur, unless you ride him—”

Roy gave no reply to this and stroking the Young Mistress' trunk, he murmured, “My mother is a good girl.”

Suddenly, the silence of the dawn was broken by the sound of a band playing. Roy moved away the elephant's trunk and asked, “Where's this band playing?”

Nitay answered in a low voice, “It's the master's son's rice-giving ceremony in the Ganguly house.”

Roy gave his habitual reply, “Yes.”

Within, Toofan had started dancing in step with the tune of the music, and the chains on the Young Mistress' feet were ringing like the tinkle of a dancing-girl's anklet-bells—jhum-jhum-jhum.

Roy walked back through the front door into the dark mansion. He remembered, once upon a time, when pipes were played every morning at dawn in the Roy mansion, then these two would dance to its music like this, Toofan on one side, the Young Mistress on the other. From upstairs he called out, “Ananta.”

“Huzur.”

“Call the manager.”

Roy went and sat on the roof-terrace. The old manager, Taraprasanna, came and stood in front of him. Roy asked, “Is it the rice-giving ceremony of Mohini Ganguly's son?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I suppose they've sent us an invitation-letter?”

"Yes," replied Taraprasanna.

"Send them a silver plate and a gold mohur."

Taraprasanna stood silently. He did not have the courage to remonstrate but evidently he did not like what his master had suggested.

"Come and take a mohur from me before you go there." Taraprasanna went away. Roy sat in silence. Ananta came and changed the tobacco bowl and holding out the pipe called, "Huzur."

Out of habit Roy stretched out his hand, then ordered, "Give out the Young Mistress' saddle, her bell. The manager will have to go to the Ganguly house."

For three generations, the Roys had piled up riches. The fourth generation had ruled; the fifth and sixth generations had indulged in luxury and debts; and with the advent of the seventh generation the Lakshmi of the Roy family had been drowned in a sea of debts—Biswambhar only sat and looked on like a Lakshmi-less God of Gods. This was not all. The line of the Roy family too ended with him. The decision of the Lower Court and the High Court had already sent Lakshmi out of the door. Casket in hand, it seemed she was just waiting for the decision of the Privy Council, to flee for ever.

It was the occasion of the son's sacred thread ceremony, and the Roy household was full of festivity. Like the flood of moonlight at the time of the full moon, a flood of eating, drinking, feeding and charity was overflowing through the house. Then came the ebb-tide and

with the ebb tide, the Roy family's flow of everything had ended. The seven days' celebration did not remain just a luxury, but turned into poison. Cholera broke out in the house. Within another seven days, Roy's wife, two sons, one daughter and several of his relations—all died. Only Roy remained waiting for death with bowed head, unmoved and patient like Bindhyagiri—the mountain who had awaited the return of the sage Agastha for eternity.

No, perhaps it was a mistake to say that he waited for death. No one knew whether he had waited for death from that day or not, but even then he had not bowed down his proud head. Two more years had to pass before his head had really been bowed, it was the day the decision of the Privy Council was given. Before that, even after the death of his wife, sons and daughter, the lights in the Jalsaghar—the hall of entertainment—had been lit; the twanging of musical instruments—Sitar, Sarangi and the tinkle of anklet-bells had resounded in that hall; sounds of loud and merry laughter had broken the deep silence of many a late night. The shikar-howdah had been strapped on the Young Mistress' back many a time, and even up to the other day, it had caused Toofan to strain and tear his ropes in rage and disappointment.

Anyway, with the Privy Council's decision all the landed property belonging to the Roys had disappeared. The house with its adjoining buildings and the perman-

ent settlement of the temple trust property alone remained. The first of the Roys had chained this settlement on paper with ink in such a way that no one could touch it; it could neither be sold nor seized by a creditor. From that trust property the temple rituals went on; grain for the Young Mistress came; Rahmat's salary was paid; in short, whatever there was now, it went on because of that arrangement. Even now the month's store of rice for the household—the finest quality of rice fit for a king—arrived regularly. Fish was delivered from the temple pond and from its marshes came game birds. The glory of the Roys had passed, but not beyond the reaches of memory. That is why, this broken-down old Roy mansion was still known as the Rajah's Palace and the luckless Biswambhar as 'Roy-Huzur.'

This little bit of past glory which still remained, pricked the heart of the new-rich Gangulies. It seemed to them that they had built their palace of gold behind an old dead mountain; and the world looked only at that old dead mountain and not at their palace of gold. The old elephant of the Roys was looked upon with greater respect than their expensive car.

. Mohim Ganguly broods and thinks that one day he will have to smash the peak of this old dead mountain.

The moment the bell was hung round the neck of the Young Mistress she began swinging her body with pride.

The bell went on ringing—ding-dong, ding-dong!

The manager, Taraprasanna, came and stood before Biswambhar. He was sitting in the big hall in the Zenana quarters. He now lived in this room. On the walls were hung pictures of the masters and mistresses of the Roy family, all of them painted in middle-age. Every one of them wore draped on their body big scarves printed all over with the name of the Goddess Kali; round their necks hung garlands of Rudraksha; in their hands they held rosaries. Biswambhar was staring at these pictures; seeing Taraprasanna he slowly turned away his gaze and called out, "Ananta, bring the cash box."

He took out a key from the box and opened the iron safe. On the top of this safe was placed the Lakshmi-casket of the Roy family. In the lower shelf there were two or three boxes. Roy pulled out a beautiful jewel-case which belonged to his dead wife. He opened the case, it was practically empty. The only ornament which remained was a Sinthi—an ornament worn on the head by the Roy brides. For seven generations it was given as the ceremonial present at the time of welcoming the heir's new bride. Excepting that, the rest of the jewels had all gone. In a small chamber of the case remained a few gold mohurs. Some of these his wife had received as wedding-gifts, and some were the first presents young Biswambhar had given to his wife. The year he was married, he had gone visiting his estates for the first time. The mohurs which his tenants had given him as Naza-

rana (tribute), he had presented to his wife. Without a word he took out one of these mohurs and gave it to the manager. The manager went away. A little later the Young Mistress' bell began peeling loudly. Roy came and stood near the window. The Young Mistress' head had been anointed with oil and decorated with a row of vermillion spots. Young Mistress went happily swinging her body to and fro.

In the afternoon the Ganguly's huge shining car came and stood beneath the broken portico of the Roy mansion. Mohim Ganguly himself came down from the car. Taraprasanna ran down and received him cordially saying, "Come in. Come in."

Ananta too had been watching his arrival from upstairs, he now ran down and quickly threw the doors of the big reception-room open.

Mohim asked, "Where's grandfather? I want to see him."

For generations the Gangulies had acted as money-lenders under the jurisdiction of the Roys. Even Mohim's father Janardan had always referred to the master of the Roy Mansion as 'Huzur.' Taraprasanna was annoyed at Mohim's impertinence in calling Biswambhar grandfather, but he replied pleasantly, "Huzur hasn't got up yet, he's having his afternoon siesta."

Mohim said, "Wake him up and tell him that I wish to see him."

Taraprasanna replied with a dry smile, "None of us

have courage enough to do that. If you have something to say to him give me the message, I'll tell him."

Impatiently Mohim replied, "No, I must see him."

Ananta brought a silver tumbler full of sherbet and held it in front of Ganguly. Mohim took it from him and asked Ananta, "Is grandfather awake?"

"Yes, he is awake. I've informed him that you've come, he has asked you to come up."

Mohim finished the glass of sherbet, got up and said, "What a lovely fragrance! What's this sherbet prepared with?"

Ananta lied, "I don't know. The ingredients are always sent from Benares."

Mohim on entering the upstairs room said, "Why grandfather! You didn't go to have your meal at our place?"

Biswambhar laughed and said, "Come in. Come in and sit down."

"I feel very grieved about it grandfather."

Biswambhar smiled again and replied, "You mustn't forget that your old grandfather is so ancient. I am an old man and my body can't stand any kind of excess."

"I'll forget this sorrow, but tonight you must come."

Biswambhar pretended to smoke his pipe and kept silent.

Mohim went on saying, "I've brought dancing girls from Lucknow. Only you can appreciate their singing and dancing."

After smoking for a little while in silence, Roy put down his pipe and then said, "I'm not well Mohim. I get a pain in my heart these days, sometimes it makes me suffer intensely."

Mohim remained silent for a little while then got up and said, "I've to go now grandfather, because I'll have to go into town and fetch all the sahibs. They are coming to attend tonight's entertainment." Biswambhar only said, "Don't feel sorry about my not coming."

When he came out of the room Mohim stood for a moment in the verandah and suddenly remarked, "What a state you've kept this house in grandfather! It ought to be repaired."

No one gave any reply to this, only Ananta called him, "Come huzur."

The auditorium for the dance performance at the Ganguly's blazed with a lavish and brilliant display of lights. All round the shamiana hung electric bulbs of many colours. The Gangulies had their own electric installation and so they had no difficulty in arranging such illumination. The shamiana posts were garlanded with leaves and flowers and hung with festoons of coloured paper. On the floor a white sheet was spread on a huge durrie for the singers, dancers and musicians. On one side of this, rows of chairs were placed for the important guests, and on the other side, a carpet was spread to seat the less

eminent guests on the floor. At the back, seats for the women guests were screened off with transparent curtains. By eight o'clock in the evening, practically all the guests had arrived and the shamiana had filled up. Tabalchis (drummers) and Sarangidars (players of violin-like string instruments) were tuning up their instruments; then two North Indian dancing girls came in wearing full skirts and veils, loaded with ornaments. Voices were hushed, conversation ceased and within a moment the audience became silent. Yes! The girls were beautiful indeed!

Mohim Ganguly was sitting on a chair among the important guests. The older of the two dancing girls had got up to sing. The long-drawn-out classical tune seemed to put the audience to sleep. Some among the audience began talking softly. There was joking and laughter among the group of important guests.

When the song was about to end, Mohim in an effort to be polite called out, "Good! Very good!" The tempo of the girl's dance which accompanied her singing seemed suddenly to slacken. She finished her song and sat down. She whispered something and smiled at her young companion, then indicated that she should get up. The audience became alive in no time. The bubbling music of her song and the quick movements of her dance burst in the midst of her audience like the leaping waters of a mountain stream. Cries of praise resounded on all sides. The guests flung bucksheesh to the dancing girls.

Again and again she danced, the audience did not get a chance to become sleepy. When the entertainment was over, Mohim sent for the dancing girls and said, "Everyone is very pleased."

The older dancing girl replied, "You are very kind." Truly, there seemed to be no end to Mohim's kindness. They had been brought to dance for three days only, but the entertainment went on for five days before it ended.

Before they took leave, Mohim did them one more act of kindness. He told them, "We have our Raja's Palace here. Visit it once before you go. Biswambhar Roy is rich and appreciates good music. Maybe, he will ask you to sing and dance for him."

The older dancing girl replied very respectfully, "We have heard of him, huzur. Of course, we will go to the Raja Bahadur's Durbar. I thought of doing so ever since I came here."

Taraprasanna was really very angry. He knew that this was just a low trick of that crooked creature—Mohim Ganguly. "This is how he tries to insult us by sending over this common prostitute," he thought. But very gravely he told her, "The master is ill, there will be no singing or dancing." The girl insisted, "Be kind enough—"

Taraprasanna broke in before she could say any more, "No, it can't be."

Sadly the dancing girl said, "It's just my bad luck."

They were going away when a shout came from upstairs, "Taraprasanna!" As soon as Taraprasanna came before him, Biswambhar asked, "Who are they?"

With his head bowed Taraprasanna replied, "The girls who came to sing and dance at the Ganguly's."

"Yes." Then after a pause Biswambhar asked, "Did you send them away empty-handed?"

"May my salaams reach you huzur!" The dancing girl touched the floor saluting in Muslim style, and continued, "Forgive me kind master, I've come in without being announced."

Biswambhar was annoyed at the impertinence of her coming to his room, but her beauty melted his heart. He gazed at her—skin as fair as a pomegranate seed; two beautiful eyes full of a dreamy enchantment outlined by a thin line of Khol; lips like two rose-petals; a tall slim-waisted figure; the lazy rhythm of a dance seemed arrested in that lovely body. At a moment's notice, it might break out as soon as she moved.

With a pleasant smile Biswambhar asked her to sit down. Sitting down most respectfully on a nearby carpet she said, "This slave is waiting to sing at Huzur Bahadur's Durbar."

Biswambhar was going to say that he was not well, but he felt ashamed, it was beneath his dignity to lie to such a one.

The dancing girl continued, "Everyone told me, that

here, you are the only one who really appreciates music. Ganguly Babu also said that you are rich, you are the Raja."

Roy stopped smoking, he looked at the dancing girl's face with a smile and said, "In the evening there will be a majlis." Then he called out, "Ananta."

Ananta was waiting outside, as soon as he came in, Roy told him, "Show them their quarters, open one of the downstairs guest-rooms."

Ananta said, "Come."

Even if she could not speak Bengali the dancing girl understood it without any difficulty. She now followed Ananta out of the room.

Taraprasanna had been standing there speechless and he continued to remain so. After a little while he said, "They charged Rs. 100/- a night from the Ganguly's."

"Yes," pulling at his pipe several times Roy went on, "Haven't you—" Then without finishing what he had to say he pulled at his pipe again. Taraprasanna said, "There is only Rs. 150/- in the temple trust account."

Roy sat thinking for a few seconds, then he got up, opened his iron safe and brought out the same jewel-case and from it he took out the Sinthi, the ornament which had been handed down for generations to the brides of the Roy family. He put it in Taraprasanna's hand and said, "Debit Rs. 150/- from the temple trust account for a Sinthi brought for the temple goddess Anandamoyee." Anandamoyee was the family deity of the Roys.

After a very long time the silent Roy mansion resounded with the sound of locks being turned. The doors and windows of the big Jalsaghar were opened. The lamp-room was unlocked and also the linen-room where light entered after many days.

Ananta was busy dusting and cleaning the rooms. Nitay and Rahmat were helping him. The old temple maid was cleaning big trays, silver hubble-bubbles, rose-water bottles and attar-dans. Taraprasanna was going around supervising everything. Ananta said to him, "We have to send someone to town."

The manager replied, "I've made a list. Listen, tell me if I've forgotten something."

After hearing the list Ananta said, "Everything is all right, only two things are missing—about two tolas of attar and some bottles of foreign wine."

"Wasn't there a bottle?"

"There's very little left in it. You see, he does have a drink sometimes. But tonight if he calls for drinks one bottle will not suffice."

The manager asked, "Whom am I to send? If I send someone to town on foot he'll never be able to return before evening."

Hesitatingly Ananta replied, "Let Nitay go on Toofan."

Nitay objected, "Unless huzur orders me—"

Taraprasanna said, "All right, I'll go and ask for his permission."

Biswambhar was lying down, when he saw the manager he said, "I was thinking of sending for you. Go to the Ganguly house and invite Mohim, also send out invitations to all the gentlemen in the village, but you must go to the Ganguly's personally."

"Yes, I'll do so."

Roy said, "Order Young Mistress to be saddled."

The manager paused a little and then said, "Nitay must be sent to town on Toofan."

"Yes, let him go."

Festivity! After a long time there was a party in the Roy mansion.

From somewhere, probably from the Jalsaghar, came a tinkling sound. Ting-tong, ting-tong, sang the crystal chandeliers. Roy left his room and walked into the verandah. Ananta was hanging up the crystal wall-lamps and chandeliers, hearing footsteps he looked towards the door and saw Biswambhar Roy standing in the doorway. He was staring at the pictures on the wall. On every side of the big hall the walls were covered with huge paintings, portraying the heirs of the Roys in their youth. Beginning from the first Roy, up to himself, all of them looked pleasure-loving and luxurious. Great-grandfather Ravaneshwar Roy stood with his foot resting on a tiger killed in shikar by him, lance in hand, shield on his back. Father Dhaneshwar was seated on a gaddi, with the

Young Mistress kneeling beside him. Young Biswambhar riding on the back of Toofan.

Many stormy dramas enacted by the Roys had taken place in this room. The fiery Ravaneshwar was the first of the Roys who had indulged in riotous living. Biswambhar recalled so many things. Ravaneshwar had built this Jalsaghar but in the end he did not get any pleasure out of it. The first day on which he had given a party in this Jalsaghar, on that very day Ravaneshwar's wife and son had been drowned in a storm on the river while they were coming in a barge. The lights in the crystal chandeliers had gone out while the candles were still half-burnt. After that he had neither the desire nor the courage to open the doors of this Jalsaghar.

Perhaps it would have been better if the line of Roys had ended on that day. But Ravaneshwar's desire to carry on the family name was too strong for him. He had married his wife's sister. He used to say that this had been enjoined upon him by Anandamoyee's divine will. His son Tarakeshwar had once again opened the doors of this Jalsaghar and lit its lamps. In competition with a rich friend, one night he had presented a dancing girl with five hundred gold mohurs.

Biswambhar then began thinking of the bits and pieces of his own life—Chandra! Chandrabai! She came to his mind. After the party he had eluded his friends and gone seeking her. He still remembered that passage with Chandra vividly. She was a fragrant unforgettable

memory—Chandra who was sweet and beautiful as a bunch of fresh flowers.

Ananta paused in his work, his hands refused to move after seeing the look on his master's face. Roy's face looked red and stormy—as if the blood in some blocked-up vein had suddenly burst out like a fountain and overflowed on that face.

The loud blast of a car's horn! Mohim Ganguly had arrived. Footsteps sounded on the staircase, a murmur of voices welcoming and receiving the guests, then a mounting buzz of conversation wafted up. Then twangs of string instruments, beats of tablas (drums) were heard from the Jalsaghar. The musical instruments were being tuned up.

Ananta came up and said from the door, "Huzur, everyone is waiting."

Biswambhar had dressed and was pacing inside the room. "Yes," then after a pause, "Give me my shoes."

Ananta seemed to hesitate a little and then from a corner cabinet he brought out a bottle and glass. He put these on a small table, then brought Roy's shoes. Roy suddenly stood still. From below, the sound of music was getting louder and louder.

Ananta called again, "Huzur." Roy just gave his usual answer, "Yes." Then paced the room a few more times. The tempo of his pacing seemed to become a little

faster. Ananta was still waiting. Roy came near the table, stood there and called out, "Soda!"

On three sides of the huge hall a long strip of thick mattress covered by a long white sheet had been laid, and on this were placed rows of fat bolsters which rested against the wall—to seat the audience. From the ceiling three huge chandeliers hung in a row. The flames of the candles in the wall-lamps were flickering slightly in the soft breeze.

Some shades were missing from the wall-lamps and chandeliers. Some of the unshaded candles had gone out. Tall shadows of those unlit candles were reflected on the walls as the embodiment, it seemed, of some latent sadness.

The music of string instruments was just budding open. The thirty or forty guests were still engaged in conversation, speaking in low tones. The pipes of four or five hubble-bubbles were being pulled at. The two dancing girls were sitting silently. Only Mohim Ganguly's loud voice occasionally rose above all other sounds. Giving a pull at the cigarette he was smoking, he glanced towards the burnt-out candles and ejaculated, "I say, several of the lights have gone out!" Nobody answered him. Then he called out, "Manager Babul!" As soon as Taraprasanna came Mohim told him, "See, these lights are too dim and the illumination isn't bright enough

for a party. Tell my driver to go and bring two Petromax lights." Taraprasanna remained silent but the older dancing girl said, as if to herself, "Is that sort of light fit for this room?"

Hearing the sound of heavy footsteps from outside Taraprasanna moved away respectfully. The other guests also stood up. Instinctively Mohim also rose halfway in his seat, then suddenly realising what he was doing quickly sat down.

Roy apologised saying with a smile, "I'm sorry, I'm a little late." Then he sat down. Mohim pulled a bolster towards himself; then pushing it away, brought out a handkerchief from his pocket, flicked it at the bolster, and said in a very annoyed manner, "Good heavens! It's full of dust!" Taraprasanna served attar to all the guests. Ananta changed the bowls of all the hubble-bubbles and brought Roy's personal one and handed him its long pipe.

The older dancing girl saluted and got up. The song began with the same long-drawn-out rendering of a classical melody, but with this difference that the entire audience was completely silent. Roy sat gravely listening with eyes closed; his huge body swinging rhythmically with the slow tempo of the song. Occasionally his left hand struck a beat on the bolster at his side. Then came a burst of drums. Roy opened his eyes. The anklet-bells on the dancing girl's feet tinkled softly and the dance began—a performance rendered by a real artist. The ges-

tures of the dance reminded one of a peacock dancing elated at the sight of clouds in the sky. The neck slightly curved; the two ends of the skirt held in two hands seemed like the fan of a peacock's tail swinging in perfect rhythm with the music. The anklet-bells pealed louder and louder. Roy called out, "Lovely! Beautiful!"

Then the dancing girl's feet became still, the song ended and the beat of the finale sounded on the drum.

Mohim drew close to Roy and whispered into his ear, "Grandfather, the music isn't gay enough; the audience is feeling dull and my throat is getting parched. Krishnabai has chilled all the fun!"

Krishnabai smiled, perhaps she understood what Mohim was saying. Ananta brought sherbet and offered it to Mohim. Mohim refused it saying, "No! I've caught a chill, keeping awake the last few nights."

Roy smiled and made a sign to Ananta who fetched a bottle of whisky, glasses and soda on a tray.

Ananta mixed a drink and gave it to Mohim, then mixed another drink and looked towards the other guests, but they were all sitting with their heads bowed. Ananta then took this drink and held it before Biswambhar. Without a word Roy picked up the glass. Mohim had been staring at the younger dancing girl, he now stirred this way and that in his seat and then called "Pearybai, now you set fire and scatter your flames!" Peary began a song with a quick gay rhythm. Roy was sitting gravely, listening with closed eyes. At a pause in

the song he said, "A little slower." But out of sheer habit, Peary went on flinging gay bubbles of light songs and dances into the midst of the audience. Again and again Mohim shouted, "Very good! Very good!"

A frown was gathering on Roy's brow. The unseemly extravagance of Mohim's praise seemed to hurt him. Yet, he was still swinging to the rhythm of the music, like a snake enchanted by the charmer's pipe. The flow of blood in his body—the hot blood of the Roys had begun to run faster. Peary was like a multi-coloured butterfly dancing from flower to flower, she reminded him of Zohra, another dancing girl from Lucknow. Krishna seemed to resemble Chandrabai of Delhi. That Chandra—who had formed a chapter in his life. Peary's dance ended. Roy was thinking of his past. The jingle of money broke into his dreams. Mohim was giving bucksheesh to Peary; he had broken the rules of etiquette. It was the host's right to give bucksheesh first. Roy looked around him in a startled manner. There was nothing before him, neither the silver tray, nor the money, which should have been there. Fixing his gaze on the floor he sat still. Then Krishnabai began to sing. Like the beating of waves on the seashore, her song overflowed from one end of the room to the other, and beat upon the hearts of the audience. She was singing: "Krishna's flute has sounded and Jamuna is rushing forth in full flow; wave upon wave, Jamuna beats on the shore seeking to break her boundaries and

draw Krishna to her bosom." The song and the dance were exquisite. Roy had forgotten his surroundings, everything! The music ended. Roy cried out, "Very good, Chandra!"

— Krishna saluted and said, "Your slave's name is Krishna." From the other side Mohim called out, "Krishnabai, here's some bucksheesh!"

Roy got up. Slowly he walked across the room and went out of the hall.

Mohim said, "Pearybai, now another from you."

Krishna said, "Let Huzur Bahadur return."

Mohim replied, "He'll come. What of it! There, I think he's coming!" But it was not Roy who entered, it was Taraprasanna. He put down a small silver tray in front of the dancing girls. There were two gold mohurs on it. He said, "The master sent this bucksheesh."

Impatiently Mohim asked, "But where is he?"

"He has a pain in his heart, he can't come; please go on listening to the music. He asked all of you to excuse him." A soft hum of voices rose from the guests. Mohim got up yawning contemptuously and said, "I must go now Taraprasanna, the magistrate is coming to see me early tomorrow."

Taraprasanna made no objection. The other guests also rose to go and the party ended.



Mistress Roy's jewel-case was lying on the floor. It was empty.

Roy was roaming aimlessly around the room with his head held up proudly. The honour of the Roys had been upheld. Drink and excitement had heated his blood to boiling point. His sense of time and place had turned topsy-turvy tonight. Absent-mindedly he went out of the room. The lights of the Jalsaghar drew him like a magnet, again he entered the room. It was all empty. Only on the walls the heirs of the Roys kept a timeless vigil. Biswambhar gazed through the open windows. Everywhere, everything was flooded with moonlight. The fragrance of Muchkunda flowers was wafted on the soft spring breeze. On a tree somewhere a Koel was singing incessantly. "Piu-kan-han?" (Where is my love?) sang the bird. Suddenly a song welled up in his heart—a long-forgotten song that Chandra had once sung: "Listen! Oh, listen my love!" He looked up through the window at the sky and saw that the moon had reached mid-heaven. A sound of footsteps made him turn round. Ananta had come to put out the lights.

Roy said, "Let them be." Ananta was going away. Roy called out, "Bring me my esraj!" (Violin-like string instrument).

Ananta brought the esraj. Roy sat down in front of the window with the esraj on his knees and ordered, "Pour." The bottle was still lying on the tray, Roy pointed at it. Ananta poured out and gave him a drink,

then went away. There was the stroke of a bow on the strings of the esraj. Music rose up in the silent house. Self-forgotten, Roy went on playing. What was it that the esraj was saying? It seemed one could clearly understand its sweet language.

The words of the song were ringing in Roy's ears—"In the depths of the night, oh, luckless woman that I am, I remain imprisoned; my evil-minded sister-in-law stands guard at the door; my eyes know no sleep; feigning sleep I worship your image; oh love! Why do you play your flute now?"

Roy pushed aside his esraj and stood up. Softly he called, "Chandra."

Chandra! His Chandra! This song too was Chandra's. From outside someone called in a sweet voice, "Janab."

Eagerly Roy cried, "Chandra! Chandra! Come here. All the friends have gone away now."

Krishna came and saluted shyly, then began to sing very sweetly the last stanza of the song he had been playing on the esraj—"Oh love! Why do you play your flute now?" With a laugh Roy toning down his baritone voice to its lowest pitch began singing too. "Oh love! It is such a beautiful night; my heart is full of the joy of victory! Can one stay alone on such a night?"

Roy was uncorking the bottle to pour out a drink. Krishna reached out her hand and said, "If my lord permits it, this slave will pour out the drink." Roy smiled and let go the bottle.

Again the esraj began to play and Krishna sang softly in accompaniment; then with her song she began to dance. She sang: "Oh love! I do not string my garland with fallen petals; give me that bunch of flowers which blossom on the high tree-top; give me those or hold me high, I will pick each one myself for you." She was dancing with her hands held high. Roy flung away his esraj and suddenly catching hold of her swung her up high; held her up with both hands and made her dance in space, without her feet touching the ground, keeping perfect time with the song. The song ended. Krishna pretended to fall down and screamed. Maddened with intoxication Roy caressed her calling her again and again, "Chandra! Chandra! My love!"

One song after another was sung, one drink after another was drunk; one bottle was already empty; the second bottle too was nearly empty. A little later the dancing girl's exhausted body rolled down on the floor. Biswambhar still sat up straight like Shiva—the Blue-Necked One, in his intoxication. Seeing the dancing girl's condition he smiled a little, then took a cushion and placed it very tenderly under her head. Again he took up his esraj and began playing. Suddenly the gong at the Ganguly house struck the hour. Dong! Dong! Dong! It was three o'clock!

From the tops of all the pillars in the Roy mansion the pigeons began to coo. With a start Roy came out of his dream. The sound of this gong woke him every morn-

ing, he got up. Only once more he caressed Krishna; with a wealth of tenderness in his voice he called her endearingly, "Chandra! Chandra! My love!" Then he came out into the verandah and called out, "Ananta."

Ananta had gone up to the roof-terrace to put out the carpet and bolster for his master. As soon as he ran down Roy ordered, "Bring me my riding clothes. Tell Nitay to saddle Toofan quickly."

Ananta looked at his master's face in amazement and saw him proudly twirling his moustaches.

The stillness of the dawn echoed with Toofan's gleeful neighing. Tarapasanna was awake. From his window he saw Biswambhar astride on the back of Toofan. He was wearing tightly-gathered close-fitting pyjamas, a long coat, and on his head—a white turban. It was still dark and though he could not see clearly Tarapasanna imagined Biswambhar was wearing gold-embroidered shoes on his feet and held a whip in his hand. Toofan went prancing along.

Crossing field after field, raising whirlwinds of dust, Toofan was racing at the speed of a storm. The cold early morning breeze blew upon Roy's heated forehead, and his intoxication was gradually wearing off. Beyond the fields they came upon a village called Kusumdihi. A bullock-cart laden with vegetables was passing by. There were two people in it, probably going to the village

market. A few words floated up to Biswambhar's ears, " Ever since the Gangulies bought up— "

Roy sharply pulled Toofan's reins and slackened his speed.

Even then the men on the bullock-cart were saying, " After paying taxes nothing remains for us. Happy! Yes, we were happy in the times of the Roy Rajahs— "

Roy looked all around him and suddenly felt startled. He was on Toofan's back! But where was he? Gradually he recognised that the place before him was Kirtechat, one among his many lost estates. The next moment he sat up straight, pulling Toofan's reins, turned him back and whipped him sharply. Again and again he whipped Toofan. Toofan burst into a tremendous gallop. When he came in front of his stable Roy paused to look all around him. The first streaks of light were just peeping into the eastern horizon.

Roy called out, " Nitay." He was panting for breath; he then realised that Toofan was also trembling violently. Roy jumped off Toofan's back and saw that his mouth was cut and bleeding profusely. Tired, still trembling, Toofan fell down. Roy stroked his head and said, " Beta! Beta!" But Toofan could not get up or even raise his head. Roy had probably not got over his intoxication completely and mumbled, " It's all a mistake my son, both yours and mine; but why be so ashamed? Get up my son! Toofan get up, get up!"

Nitay was waiting behind. He said, " He's very tired,

as soon as he's rested, he'll get up again."

With a start Roy turned round and saw Nitay. Leaving Toofan in Nitay's hands he rushed into the house. Upstairs he saw that the doors of the Jalsaghar were still open. He peeped in, the room was empty! She had gone. The whisky bottles rolled on the ground—empty. All the lights in the chandeliers and wall-lamps had not flickered out yet, some of them were still burning. From the walls, the proud Roy heirs stared down with wild laughter on their faces, suddenly Biswambhar drew back in sudden fear. He had a strange feeling that he saw his real image mirrored there. Delusion, not only his, but of all the seven Roys was stored in this room. He came away from the door, then leaning on the verandah railing, like a frightened child he cried out, "Ananta! Ananta!"

Ananta came running. He had never heard his master cry out in such a voice. As soon as he came Roy screamed, "Put out the lights! Put out the lights! Shut the doors of the Jalsaghar! The Jalsaghar "

No more words came, only the whip held in his hand was flung away and struck the door of the Jalsaghar with a violent crash!



 *About Authors* 

Achintya Kumar Sengupta combines many excellences : his stories offer a subtly balanced fare, served in suitable technique. Sufficiently old school to believe in intrinsic traditions, he is also modern in his close-up renderings of life; his language ranges from the reminiscent and associational to vigorous contemporary awareness. Others may excel him in wit, in psycho-analytical skill or in social interpretation but he enjoys an all-round command. What is more, in sheer craftsmanship he is next to none among his contemporaries. His artistry is traceable to his poetic training; the discipline of the measured line and of the finished form has sunk into his essential style.

His first novel, written in collaboration with Premendra Mitra, came out when he was yet an undergraduate; this was the beginning of his literary career. A new set of writers, young and forceful, was then struggling to emerge into Bengali literature. Achintya Kumar belonged to this group, but he agreed to differ on many issues. He would not carry his revolt against tradition to the point of denying Rabindranath, for whom he expressed his reverence in a poem which has become famous. Even today, at the age of 39, after publishing no less than twenty-one books, and with an established reputation of his own as a writer and as a member of the Judicial Department of the Government of Bengal, he considers Rabindranath to be his master: he is a humble disciple. Achintya Kumar's style, however, is in no sense derivative, nor are his subjects imitative: he is

downright and realistic in his own manner. His main theme is the lower middle class, both of Calcutta and of the mofussil towns.

Annada Sankar Ray. "Much interested in folk-songs, folk-dances, folk-art, handicrafts and patterns of culture with a folk basis. Firm believer in non-violence in theory and practice. See no hope for civilisation without this moral equivalent of war being universally used in settlement of conflicts. A new order whose sanctions are violent cannot be a better order." This is his own statement of belief. And this is what he tries to prove in his 'epic' novel "Truth and Untruth" which runs through several volumes.

His literary style, as we find it in a varied beauty in his short stories, essays, and in his novels is highly individual and refined, carrying a rare lightness of touch and brilliant wit. His verse reveals the same quality of delicate refinement. In whatever he writes, there is an intellectual clarity and balance, but the emotional current runs strong.

Annada Sankar was born in 1904 at Dhenkanal, in Orissa where his father was in State service. He spent his boyhood in Orissa, and has written books in the Oriya language. But Bengali is his real medium, and though he writes in English with distinction, he has more than 20 volumes in Bengali to his credit. It is remarkable that

amidst the heavy duties of an I.C.S. officer he can manage to write much and write so beautifully.

‘Bonoful.’ Bonoful’s personality is a series of paradoxes: that is how it would appear to a chronicler. He is a dramatist whose only hobby is cooking. He is a short story writer whose profession is that of a Bacteriologist. And besides, his name is not really Bonoful. It is Dr. Balai Chand Mukherji, a distinguished member of the medical profession in Bhagalpur, Behar, who is well-known in Bengal by his pen-name. In his literary works, too, there are anomalies. His talent finds best expression in dramatic writing; “Shri Madhusudan” and “Vidyasagar” were real stage successes, and won recognition as fine plays. But he himself does not seem serious enough about dramas: he allows his pen to produce frequent comic skits and parodies, and feeds the journals with novels which run concurrently two or even three at a time. He is at home in the macabre, as well as in pure phantasia, but his novels also reveal a diversity of normal characters. He is unique in his short stories which are dramatic, and quintessential: sometimes, he can compress a story into a page or less than a page in a magazine. Many of his stories which appear inconsequential, reveal significances as one reads them again; but he does not aim at subtle psychological effects. It is the dramatic incident, implied in the story rather than any reflection

of ideas or of the social conscience which holds our interest. And he has an abundant gift of humour. He is now 47 and his writings show a technical maturity denied to many of his younger contemporaries.

Bibhuti Bhusan Banerjee. Rural Bengal, strangely enough, is rare in modern Bengali literature. The present trend is to deal with aggregates of life in the city, with problems of labour, and of complicated social forces,—the village, even where it appears, would come as an extension of large scale problems or as scenic context. Bibhuti Bhusan was one of the first of moderns to turn to the village for its own sake, and to bring a new realism to the delineation of details—without, however, sacrificing the atmospheric effects. Even when he comes to Calcutta, as in his later novels, he brings the ‘innocent eye,’ the rural sight we may call it, which deals less with the alien elements that rule the city than with the basic roots of civic life which can yet be traced back to the village.

Son of a village Kathak—the wandering story-teller—he spent most of his childhood in an obscure village near the river Ichamati. After matriculating, he came to Calcutta and joined the University. With a B.A. degree in his pocket, and very little else there, he searched hard for a job and finding none, took to aimless wandering. For eight years he travelled far and wide in East Bengal, in

hills and forests and along river banks: it was then that he absorbed different village backgrounds and traced their common pattern in his novel "Pather Panchali" ("Tales of the Road") which is still considered to be his greatest work. This book brought him immediate recognition, and gave him an established life. The memories of early childhood and of his youthful travels enter into his writings; his stories are charged with the spirit of rural nature, human nature intervenes but never quite plays the dominant rôle. Bengal's flowers and fields, her folk-lore and traditions live in his short stories and novels, but while he cherishes the genuine social usages, the harmful customs lie mercilessly if artistically exposed in his writings. He has, he says, only two hobbies; angling and forest wandering. The occasional mystic air of his stories is surely due to this life of jungles with which mysterious associations are built up in the popular imagination.

Jyotirmoyee Devi is one of the few women writers for whom the modern world exists with all its pressing urgency. She writes with a keen sense of environmental reality, and does not allow emotion to deflect her from her task of emotional analysis which requires a central loyalty to facts. But her novels are good stories too; they are not a bare transcript of details. One would see in her writing a characteristically feminine outlook: the minu-

tia of domestic life blend with pervasive feelings without harming each other. She has found a corner of her own in the short story; without competing with major writers, she plays her rôle as a competent and distinctive storyteller. Women writers are emerging, but not to the extent that we should have expected; after the generation of writers led by Svarnakumari Devi, Anurupa Devi, and Nirupama Devi, not so many gifted women have entered the fictional field. Education, politics and social service have claimed them; the world of children's literature has also commandeered distinguished feminine talents,—Lila Majumdar's name would immediately come to our mind—but the novel and the short story lie bereft of their new and creative incentive. Jyotirmoyee Devi has, therefore, a special claim to our gratitude.

Manik Banerjee. Art, for this great artist, is an overflow of life. He writes with an effortless abundance which seems to throw up eddies and currents and forms while flowing with fulness like the river Padma which he knows so well. But his characters are unpredictable, often rugged and elemental; there is no attempt to maintain an even course, or to pursue a tradition; his men and women, indeed, pursue their destination which is nothing but their own inscrutable destiny. A slight tinge of the morbid seems to touch his stories, as if the unconscious had taken over and thwarted the conscious

mind; abnormalities there seem more normal till a new process of sublimation is reached. But Manik Banerjee is no doctrinaire; he writes with unstudied absorption. Life in the raw, impulses and actions are handled without a preconceived approach; the encounter is direct and specific. "Padma Nadir Majhi" was his first great success, soon to be followed by greater successes; these novels are not only primal in their approach to East Bengal life but are characteristically regional and steeped in the riverine atmosphere. He sees hard and clear, is less concerned with the intellect than with the psychological totality, and loves to use the different dialects of Bengal to reveal intimate urgencies of speech and behaviour. Novels and short stories continue to pour from his pen with undiminished vitality.

Manindralal Bose. A Bengali travelling in Europe or just back from such travels—that is the impression he gives to his readers. Manindralal Bose seems to preserve a traveller's detachment from contemporary scenes and movements; he remains distant and unclassifiable. And he preserves a romantic vision, the sort of vision which can integrate varied impressions and still retain its sense of wonder. His stories often give us a cosmopolitan fare: the Bengali mind is there, but the context is Europe, or perhaps a romantic spot somewhere just outside Bengal. He moves with ease in this delightful world and peoples

it with characters who are in harmony with it. His language is fresh and vivid and draws upon associations which are new to our readers because of their wide world context. Manindralal Bose's stay in Europe as a law student and his extensive tours have filled his mind with pictures. Today, at the age of 47, he can use his experiences with a mature craftsmanship.

Manoje Basu. "When a boy of seven," writes Manoje Basu, "I got a copy of Bankimchandra's works. The author's fame and his romantic inspiration moved the village boy to writing. That very day I wrote a poem, a few lines of which I still retain in my memory." Manoje Basu does indeed write in the romantic tradition but romanticism would here mean the mellow, peaceful outlook based on Bengal's lyric genius and not any brand of evasionism. "My hobby is to go to the villages and to mix with people without disclosing my identity." And these wayside contacts, with men and nature, he loves to bring into his stories. "Vast paddy fields and extensive moorland," he observes, "stretch in front of my village home. These had a special appeal for my boyish fancy and so they have for my grown-up imagination."

Manoje Basu's literary output is not plentiful, and it consists mainly of short stories. These stories move us by their idyllic charm and refinement.

Premendra Mitra. "Pank" (or "Mud"), a novel written at the age of 14, announced in 1919 a powerful writer in Bengal. It is no wonder that Premendra Mitra has ultimately proved himself to be one of the ablest story-tellers after Rabindranath and Saratchandra. He along with Sailajananda Mukherjee, has brought new vigour to Bengali fiction. Starkly realistic, inspired by the age of the great Russian novelists, Premendra Mitra has surely stimulated a whole generation, not only by his fiction but also by his poems. He has ever been on the side of the down-and-out and has levelled his wrath on the super-dog, but his sympathy has been rational as well as based on feelings. He knows his countrymen, particularly those whose lives are caught in a web of perpetual toil and struggle. But the slums, for instance, are not merely a grim and dirty background for tears and lamentations: he knows them to be a real world with its own life, its own romance, and its own dramas and melodramas. Yet, being a sensitive artist, he needs relaxation, and Premendra Mitra, particularly in his later poems, lets himself move in a free flight of imagination. As a result of which we get magnificent poems.

Literary talent in Bengal, even when it is recognised and accepted by the public, brings fame but without any silver lining. Thus, a writer like Premendra Mitra, has also to depend entirely upon extra-literary work: he has been a school teacher, a copy-writer for the advertisers,

editor of various journals, and now he is a scenario-writer in a well-known film company.

Sailajananda Mukherjee. Bengali literature has taken a definite turn towards factual realism, and one of the main leaders of this new movement has been Sailajananda. A group of writers found their common platform in the well-known modernist journals—Kallol, Pragati, Kali-Kalam, and established their authenticity within a few years both in the domain of fiction and in poetry.

In 1920, barely 19 years old, Sailajananda began writing short stories and novels. From the very start he proved his vigorous pen, and almost emerged as an experienced writer. Not adolescent dreams but encounter with facts—life in all its aspects—this was his motto. His early youth he spent among the half-starved, exploited proletariats of Bengal. They remain his heroes and heroines. Some of his short stories which have the background of coal mines, are brilliant in their portrayal of types, incidents, and of a hard unrelenting environment. These stories, indeed, have few parallels in Bengali literature. His novels, too, are unique and carry the impress of a creative imagination which has entered deep into the fundamentals of modern circumstance. Unfortunately, though he was prolific in his youth, Sailajananda is now an extremely spare writer, and, like

Premendra Mitra, has bestowed his talents on the neighbourly world of the cinema.

Subodh Ghose. "Starting as a school-master," says our author, "I had the following occupations: Performer on the horizontal bar of a circus; district board health inspector; sanitary inspector on Haj pilgrimage service (Bombay-Aden); bus conductor on Ranchi-Gaya Motor Service; confectioner; hotel-keeper; mica-mining prospector; vaccinator; poultry farmer; butter merchant in Cornwallis Street For a few months I had turned Sannyasi, then led the life of a Muslim when I joined the gypsy gang. In my political life I worked as a volunteer of Girney Union, then as a Congress worker." After all these varied and interesting careers, in 1941, Subodh Ghose, at the age of 33, took to writing. He published a few stories and won immediate recognition. He had lived through many a story and novel in his own life, so that the material was ready, and also, a language which could give it the right expression, was his. Vivid and terse, his phrases reveal a masculine power in which crude energy has been disciplined by an experienced mind; there is an inherent balance in his paragraphs that could only have come from mature judgment. His subjects are often unfamiliar to the ordinary reader, they are gleaned from many fields and sometimes startle us by their bareness, but his

psychological power seldom fails him, nor does he suffer from lack of contextual knowledge. We turn the last page convinced that the author has given us real life, and we are moved by his sensitiveness to suffering. "My political conviction is Socialism," he says. And surely he has been successful in giving human reality to his economic and social view of life, which in his case, has not been a mere source of theories but is the product of deep emotional experience.

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Tarashankar Banerjee. "I was then an ardent Congress worker," writes Tarashankar, "and in one of our campaigns I had to go to a village called Belera in Birbhum. Opposite to where I lived was a Vaisnab camp which had a striking personality in Kamalini—a Vaisnab woman who later figured as the heroine of my story 'Rai Kamal.' At this time, I came across a copy of the journal 'Kali Kalam' in which I read two stories, one by Premendra Mitra and the other by Sailajananda Mukherjee These stories inspired me to write from my own experiences—the experiences gained by an average middle class Bengali of the life I saw around me." This was probably in 1928-29 and Tarashankar was then 29. He grew interested in the decadent zemindars of Bengal and began to write about them, mixing in his portrayal a relentless exposure of landlordism with a deep understanding of cause and effect; his intimate rendering of

peasant lives was the result of the completest identification with their tragic existence. But the note of revolt is also there; and a new glimmer of hope touches his pen even while he describes the present phase of suffering Bengal. Tarashankar has also a marked flair for the dramatic, and the power with which he would present a situation in his novels and short stories led us to expect that he was destined to write plays. His three dramas, 'Kalindi,' 'Dui Purus,' and 'Pather Dak' have made him deservedly popular; he has, perhaps, established a more satisfying communication with the public through his creative work than any other living writer.

END OF VOLUME ONE



